

# Lateral

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## Cultural Studies in the Interregnum

by Robert F. Carley, Stefanie A. Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

| Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** This issue of *Lateral* contributes to a number of ongoing questions and conversations. In it, we see a range of methodologies that span particular sites, take up theoretical debates, and cross borders and boundaries, both political and cultural. The work of this issue sits in conversation with the present moment, even as it at times draws on and excavates the past. 2020 has seemed to both accelerate and extend a number of ongoing crises and emergencies that have defined the decade. Contributors to this issue are working in and through this gap. Many new structures, including a new structure of feeling, are ascendant, and the task of contemporary cultural studies is clear: thinking and theorizing the interregnum will define the work of the present conjuncture.

**KEYWORDS** cultural studies

Cultural studies, today, is a field that offers radical possibilities: it is a locus for theories of politicized and socialized commons; it provides a venue for rethinking the role of culture and political organizations including the political party; it finds seeds of revolutionary fervor bursting out of visual spaces. Cultural studies has identified and explored the emergence of new theoretical conversations in settler colonialism, new materialism, disability studies, and neo-institutionality. And cultural studies is in a constant dialogue with itself, reflecting a self-referentiality that spans its history and the contemporary moment. Cultural studies of today has expanded and deepened intersectionality in its various articulations and disarticulations, enriching the thought that demonstrates the changing (and changing-same) shape of relations between race, class, and capital. Such work is evident in the pages of *Lateral*, and editors and authors alike have labored to produce the means, relations, and spaces—virtual and real—that reflect the projects and the politics that comprise the field.

Across cultural studies' relatively short history it has, in the immediate post-war period, used close reading to constitute—for the first time—working class life as culture; as complex, artefactual, and rich in its varieties of meaning and practice. In the 1970s it placed discourse analysis of media and politics in conversation with statistical data to paint a picture of the nascent neoliberal state's response to race and migration, making cultural studies seem almost prophetic. Contemporary cultural studies thrives due to an open-door policy to various methods, theories, and objects of study that can help it locate tensions and contradictions as they are made manifest. For *Lateral*, cultural studies is more than multi-methodological. Cultural studies finds common cause with the various fields and disciplines that are concerned with the production of the contemporary moment whether they be humanistic, social-scientific, or, at times, outside of liberal arts proper.

It is our hope for *Lateral* to become more uniquely poised to evaluate and appraise cultural studies' orientation towards the contemporary and, indeed, the future. *Lateral's* life-span

covers the last decade, and in that time that it has developed into one of a handful of pulse-points for cultural studies; it is a place one visits if they want to understand what cultural studies has been (Years in Cultural Studies < <https://csalateral.org/years>> project), where it is (our regular articles < <https://csalateral.org/archive>> , book reviews < <https://csalateral.org/reviews>> ), and how it is developing (Forums < <https://csalateral.org/forums>> ) through the economic and financial crisis that followed 2008, during the course of the last four years, and in the interim.

The economic, political, environmental, and social patterns of this period, highlighted recently in the US response to the coronavirus, raises the specter of an interregnum. In an often cited passage, Antonio Gramsci says, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."<sup>1</sup> Gramsci refers to periods where a relatively strong stability, a powerful bloc of interests, or, even, a hegemony (signifying the predominance of a particular ideology) is waning and nothing has emerged on the horizon. It is a borrowed term that refers to a cessation of rule or governance between reigns, regimes, or administrations. Framing this period as an interregnum suggests political opportunities, but does not define who may take advantage of these opportunities. In fact, it clearly indicates the flourishing of disturbing, abnormal, and monstrous symptoms. In certain ways, fascism already organizes to take advantage of these instabilities,<sup>2</sup> and the left will remain disorganized at its own peril.

In no small part, the political projects, critical pedagogy, and scholarly and intellectual practices of cultural studies define and distinguish it from other commitments of thought and intellectual practice today. As we close out our first decade with this final issue of 2020, *Lateral* moves more firmly toward explicating the interregnum, reflecting on how the journal lays the groundwork for contextualizing the present in light of the last ten years. What has happened in the most recent decade that has brought us to precisely where we are today? And how have these events been taken up, critiqued, and transformed by cultural studies?

The past ten years have shown us that global economic, financial, and environmental crises are increasingly common, reiterating as the condition of racial capitalism rather than its exceptions. Devastating storms, temperature records, and natural disasters are yearly occurrences, exacerbating the persistent and destabilizing effects of poverty and conflict in, for example, the US, South America, and the Middle East and Africa, especially Syria, Iran, and Turkey. Planetary movements from below have shaped not only contemporary policy and politics but the ways that politics are practiced: the *Indignados*; Occupy Wall Street; Antifa; Indigenous environmental justice movements including against drilling, fracking, and pipelines; *Gilets Jaunes*; the record-setting 2020 Indian farmers' strikes; and global movements against trans and queer oppression; along with the many manifestations of the Movement for Black Lives, especially Trans Black Lives Matter. These changes exist amidst rapidly escalating pseudo-populist movements that span and overlap regional, national, and international interests and populations. The self-proclaimed "alt-right" and neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, and white supremacist groups are bolstered and encouraged by proto-fascist parties and political leaders from Trump to Modi to Bolsonaro to Duarte as we witness the end of the "Pink Wave" in Latin America and the rise of conservative and reactionary figures and cohorts. Our most recent decade has produced a *sui generis* response to the crises that mark this interregnum. Cultural studies is a field that is best poised to address what Stuart Hall has referred to as the culture-society couplet in the present.<sup>3</sup> How do we do cultural studies in an interregnum?

In the lead article of this issue, "From Gwangju to Brixton: The Impossible Translation of Han Kang's *Human Acts*," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/from-gwangju-to-brixton-impossible-translation-han-kang-human-acts-pak/>> Yumi Pak holds together two disparate conversations that exemplify the possibilities for cultural studies today. The first focuses on tensions between autobiography and fiction within Black literary traditions, and the other on unsettling widely-held narratives of the United States as savior figure in the Korean War. In the interstice, Pak offers a sprawling cultural geography in narrative form: a diasporic memory work, or an *autohistoria-teoría*—"a personal essay that theorizes"—on Han Kang's novel *Human Acts*. Pak's theoretically robust and riveting narrative account of what brought her to "do something" with Kang's *Human Acts* is a unique act of poesis. It pulls together the personal, theoretical, historical, and cultural across geographic and racial boundaries in ways that scholarship in cultural studies often can and does not.

In *Lateral* 8.1, AK Thompson < <https://csalateral.org/issue/8-1/when-shock-is-no-longer-shocking-benamins-dialectical-image-thompson/>> showed how Benjamin's conception of shock in the context of the dialectical image might be saved by strategies of epistemological seduction that operate, not to substitute shock, but rather as a concrete strategy for revitalizing our capacity to experience it. This issue features Thompson's article "How to Do Things with Walter Benjamin." < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/how-to-do-things-with-walter-benjamin-thompson/>> Thompson points out that although Benjamin is now a common reference point within cultural studies, no one has tried to build upon his contributions by operationalizing his broader intellectual project—a project developed in part across texts like "The Artist as Producer," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the *Passagenwerk*, and *The Arcades Project*. Drawing on these as well as a broader range of texts, Thompson argues for, shows, and further develops Benjamin's approach, to the methodological benefit of cultural studies scholars today.

In "Border Trash: Recovering the Waste of US-Mexico Border Policy in *Fatal Migrations* and 2666," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/border-trash-us-mexico-policy-fatal-migrations-2666-quintanilla/>> Alyssa Quintanilla continues conversations about the relationship between the legal, economic, and ideological infrastructures that shape the US-Mexico border. Through analysis of Robert Bolaño's novel 2666 and Josh Begley's digital art installation *Fatal Migrations*, Quintanilla reveals how these artists challenge the deployment of discourses of environmentalism and waste disposal that facilitate the dehumanization at the heart of deaths around the border. By linking femicides on the southern side of the border with the deaths of migrants headed north, Quintanilla illuminates how the patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism extend beyond state boundaries to shape spaces and lives.

The question of where something comes from often uncovers more than just a neat origin story. Shantam Goyal's "Sounds from Nowhere: Reading Around *Raga-Jazz Style*" < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/sounds-from-nowhere-reading-around-raga-jazz-style-goyal/>> traces political and artistic interchange across continents and artists, uncovering the work and influence of Shankar-Jaikishan. Goyal reconsiders the specificity of the album in light of the markets of music and colonial histories. In doing so, Goyal offers us a way of reading the past through a particular piece of art that encapsulates and crystalizes modes of exchange and influence.

Finally, this issue features Ashvin Kini's essay, "Political Blackness, British Cinema, and the Queer Politics of Memory." < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/political-blackness-british-cinema-and-the-queer-politics-of-memory/>> Kini explores "political Blackness" (originally

a coalitional antiracist politics in England in the 1970s and 1980s) as a queer feminist politics based on multiple, nonequivalent histories of gendered racialization. In doing so, the author more than queers political Blackness; rather, Kini's reading renews the concept for contemporary cultural theorists and critics. Kini provides readers with an interpretive practice that queers the politics of racial representation as a multi-faceted haunting that locates the literal and metaphorical specters of the British empire in contemporary texts. Kini's work develops political Blackness beyond the faultlines, or ruptures, that queer and feminist challenges proffered to both the concept and the political strategy from decades before.

As a whole, this issue of *Lateral* contributes to a number of ongoing questions and conversations. In it, we see a range of methodologies that span particular sites, take up theoretical debates, and cross borders and boundaries, both political and cultural. The work of this issue sits in conversation with the present moment, even as it at times draws on and excavates the past. 2020 has seemed to both accelerate and extend a number of ongoing crises and emergencies that have defined the decade. Contributors to this issue are working in and through this gap. Many new structures, including a new structure of feeling, are ascendant, and the task of contemporary cultural studies is clear: thinking and theorizing the interregnum will define the work of the present conjuncture.

## Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 276. [↗](#)
2. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007). [↗](#)
3. Colin MacCabe, "An Interview With Stuart Hall, December 2007." *Critical Quarterly*, 50, no. 1-2 (2008 Spring-Summer). [↗](#)

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## From Gwangju to Brixton: The Impossible Translation of Han Kang's *Human Acts*

by Yumi Pak | Articles, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** This article theorizes the relationship between trauma and translation through a close reading of Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) and its complex narrating of the Gwangju Democratization Movement of 1980. I engage with the novel through scholarship on state-sanctioned violence, the politics of memory and Korean and Black literary and cultural studies. I do this to consider how the massacre of Gwangju's residents by their own government is made possible by earlier histories of occupation and imperial violence in the Korean peninsula. I then turn to the Korean edition of the novel to address what emerges outside of the English translation. Here, I rely on my own language skills to read, translate and direct attention to what is lost in Deborah Smith's published translation of Han's novel. Specifically, I argue that Smith's version of *Human Acts* actively works against Han's subversive articulation of the elusiveness of subjectivity, the rending of the world vis-à-vis violence, the possibilities afforded by opacity and the dilemma of what it means to write about "one's own" historical trauma. In an attempt to reflect critically on what it might mean to live in the ongoing ripples of such traumas, I offer a text that blurs autobiography, travel writing, Black Studies, and literary analysis, crafting something that may be situated under the aegis of cultural studies and alongside what Gloria Anzaldúa names an autohistoria-teoría and what Crystal Baik calls a diasporic memory work.

**KEYWORDS** Black studies, Gwangju Democratization Movement, Han Kang (author), Human Acts (novel), Korean studies, literary studies

"Defiled space never goes away. Its reoccurrence negates time as distance"

—Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*<sup>1</sup>

In an interview with the Scots Makar Jackie Kay, Petra Tournay-Theodotou asks "what prompted [her] decision to publish [her] life story—in particular, the delicate story of tracing [her] birth parents—in prose form as a full-fledged autobiography."<sup>2</sup> While much of Kay's prolific output is informed by her embodied knowledges as a Black Scottish lesbian, *Red Dust Road* (2011)—the "full-fledged autobiography" in question—is perhaps her first work of prose that reads as having a stake in the intimate veracity of her life. Kay replies, "that was a surprise for me; my life turned into a story that was happening to me and I felt that in order to process that story I'd have to write about it as a life story."<sup>3</sup> Both Tournay-Theodotou's question and Kay's answer speak to the assumptions readers hold around the autobiographical genre in contrast to fiction: that the former is somehow truer than the latter, closer to the skin. It is as though, as Elizabeth Nunez writes,

the contrivances of the art of fiction allow [the writer] distance from [her] personal experiences. It is the necessary aesthetic distance the writer needs in order to transform the ordinary, the mundane, into a work of art, offering at the same time cover for the writer, the veil of illusion behind which she can safely hide herself from the glare of the public eye, and—this is more personal—from the glare of perhaps disturbing introspection.<sup>4</sup>

For Nunez, choosing to write fiction has to do with the “necessary aesthetic distance” that is unafforded when writing autobiography. Kay’s explanation echoes in contrasting fashion, as she admits that part of the reason she writes *Red Dust Road* is “in order to process” what it meant to search for her Nigerian birthfather. At the same time, both Nunez and Kay suggest—it is a “veil of *illusion*,” a “*life story*” (italics mine)—that the separation between fiction and autobiography is a construction.

Utilizing these affordances of “necessary aesthetic distance” from “personal experiences” becomes immeasurably more complicated when we take into consideration the entanglements of the personal and structural. In Crystal Baik’s *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*, she proposes a framework of “reencounters,” a concept which “captures how diasporic memory works catalyze moments of return and remembering that denaturalize naturalized temporalities, solidified presumptions, and historical knowledges.”<sup>5</sup> In thinking through and with a selection of diasporic memory works by those displaced by the Korean War and the resulting expansion of South Korean and United States militant and neoliberal state structures, Baik tracks the *longue durée* of this unended violence. In doing so, she reads how the cultural creators in question turn to and produce aesthetic mediations to challenge the United States’ initial and ongoing political interference in the Korean peninsula; too, they use these spaces and forms to question how they themselves are constructed as potentially undesirable Korean subjects in the world.<sup>6</sup>

I bring together two seemingly disparate conversations—one on the tensions between autobiography and fiction within Black literary traditions and the other on unsettling widely held narratives of the United States as savior figure in the Korean War—because their generative intersection is where my article begins: what does it mean to attempt to turn away from “the glare of perhaps disturbing introspection” because to face it, to face oneself, is tantamount to forcing confrontations with structural violences writ large? To bringing to the foreground how one carries within sedimentations of undead histories never laid to rest? Both Black and Korean (and Korean American) literary and aesthetic traditions have long grappled with this unease, and, as Dana A. Williams argues, if “the question of genre in the African American literary tradition is as old as the tradition itself,”<sup>7</sup> this is in part because Kay and Nunez, along with numerous others working within Black literary and aesthetic traditions, destabilize form and genre to have us think differently about the supposedly easy binaries of past and present, fiction and truth, aesthetic and political, personal and structural.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Baik’s objects of analysis are “multisensorial multimedia projects that crystallize through dissolving lines, cacophonous sounds, and divergent temporalities” to formulate alternative readings of South Korea’s achievements and the United States’ assistance post-1953.<sup>9</sup> To be trained in these traditions, produced through these histories and living in their afterlives is to grasp that, as Edward Said argues, “no one has ever devised a method of detaching the scholar the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society.”<sup>10</sup> Or, to form it as a slightly different question, “how much distance can there be between the pen

and the hand that holds it?"<sup>11</sup> The separation of genres, between what was and what is, is wielded as a move that insists on the compartmentalization of submerged knowledges into more quantifiable measures so as to determine what merits serious consideration. It is precisely this that I wish to argue against.

It is in this mode of thinking that I offer what follows—a kind of diasporic memory work, a kind of autohistoria-teoría,"a personal essay that theorizes," on Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016), which takes as its point of origin the Gwangju Democratization Movement (광주 민주화 운동) of 1980.<sup>12</sup> As I discuss later in this article, my initial attempts at analyzing Han's novel were thwarted precisely because the form of writing in which I am most practiced made it nigh impossible for me to address the crosscurrents of how the *when* and *where* of reading this book deeply informed my initial reading. This was because the form of writing in which I am most practiced, in many ways, is still "fixing a constellation of ideas for a time at least, a fixing which no doubt will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else's competing theory."<sup>13</sup> What I wanted to do instead was critically engage with how "my life turned into a story that was happening to me." This is particularly important as Han explicitly links the Gwangju Democratization Movement to the 1953 partition of Korea, a result of the Korean War which has produced and shaped my understanding of my family history. Because of the trauma of familial lines being split and disappearing into the ether of United States' interference and South Korean nationalism, the histories that I wish to have access to have been foreclosed to me; instead, what I am offered are official narratives that quite often position South Korea as a neoliberal model of success and the North as a hermit kingdom of terrorism at worst, and, at best, the butt of late night talk show hosts' tired jokes about reductive backwardness. In other words, what follows is an attempt at answering, even temporarily, questions that are by no means unique to me: how does one write one's life story when it is interrupted by the story of partition and empire? What might it mean to write such a life story under the aegis of cultural studies? And, in the writing of such a life story, in such a processing, what emerge as residues of that interruption that are still here, that still dictate how one might tell a story, this story?

## I.

August 27, 2016—it's my last day in Glasgow for the summer, and I've chosen to spend part of it in the Waterstones on Sauchiehall Street. I'm on the second floor, mentally rifling through the carry-on and backpack out of which I've been living for a month, figuring out what I can leave behind were I to purchase books for my train ride to London and the Black Cultural Archives the following morning. I always remember to pack lightly, but also forget to leave space for the reading material I will inevitably buy. In my cataloguing, however, nothing seems dispensable, and I reluctantly turn toward the stairs when I see it: a soft-matte, powdery-black cover, two legs surgically amputated at the calves and rendered hollow: *Human Acts*, by Han Kang.<sup>14</sup> A quick check online tells me that it has yet to be published back home, so I take a copy to the cashier, who, after his initial hello, asks if I've read *The Vegetarian*. I have. I ask if he has. Aye. We talk about Han's 2016 Man Booker International Prize winner for a bit—"weird," "creepy," and "violent" the dominant adjectives in our conversation, his rolled r's distinct from my Bay Area-flattened ones—as we wait for my credit card to clear. Transactions like these have become much easier with the United States finally catching up with chip technology, but he still needs me to sign for

my purchase. Something in my drawled scribble, in that exaggerated Y, is meant to prove that I am who I say I am.

## II.

The train leaves from Glasgow Central Station and takes about five-and-a-half hours to reach Victoria Station, and I read *Human Acts* in one sitting across the border in the ostensible quiet car where a chatterbox family gives lie to its naming. The novel is a multi-voiced, multilayered text that details both the Gwangju Democratization Movement and the aftermath of the government-sanctioned massacre, the febrile and alienating stretch of trauma that rolls and roils without end. The uprising takes place May 18–28, 1980 in Gwangju, a city in southwest Korea, where university students and citizens in due course militantly protested the martial law government of Chun Doo Hwan, who had come to power after the assassination of then-president Park Chung Hee and a military coup on December 12, 1979.<sup>15</sup> The event is one that I am not taught by my parents or my teachers during my years attending Korean language and culture classes on the weekends, a gift that felt like a burden, no doubt an experience shared by numerous 1.5 or second generation Korean Americans. I learned about the Japanese occupation of the peninsula, about Yu Gwan Sun, but not about the violences that occurred in the ostensibly democratic—and if not democratic, then at least comparatively “better than North Korea”—country of my birth.<sup>16</sup> This omission is striking, given that during Chun’s presidency (1980–1988), “the Gwangju massacre remained a central issue for the democratization movements in Korea...Especially for student activists in South Korea in the 1980s, the issue of democratization was inseparable from unearthing the hidden truth concerning the Gwangju massacre.”<sup>17</sup> In retrospect, the lapse in historical education must have been intentional. Gripped by the fear of losing us to assimilation, I cannot imagine that my Korean school teachers believed that a history of protestors being murdered by their own government would have been useful in inspiring identification, nostalgic or imaginary; Yu, a martyred teenager who with her dying breath predicted the fall of the Japanese Empire, was a much more suitable role model for both my gendering and that of Korea as the motherland in need of protection and filial respect. In no way is this move of mobilizing “idealized images of women, reflected in cinematic narratives and images” in the “context of nation building projects”<sup>18</sup> exclusive to Korea, but the rhetoric around its uniqueness—*our* uniqueness—is one that I was taught by said teachers in a move to disseminate a nationalist pride.<sup>19</sup>

I also remained ignorant of how “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”<sup>20</sup> The ways in which the Japanese occupation made Korea ripe for the Korean War, the ways in which the Korean War made Korea open to an incessant United States’ military presence as a mark of gratitude and protection against the ever-promised threat of communism, the ways in which such gratitude and protection made possible camptowns, martial law and dictatorships; such are the overlapping hauntings of modern Korean history. In other words, as Caruth suggests and to borrow from Indigenous and Native Studies, the Gwangju Democratization Movement is less an event and more symptomatic of a structure of an ongoing repression of dissent beginning with Japanese occupation and continuing into United States’ presence and South Korea’s own dictatorships.<sup>21</sup> Or, as Baik argues, it is critical to read “the Korean War’s calamities less as exceptional aftereffects

than as structuring conditions of contemporary life."<sup>22</sup> Rather than solely focusing on the temporal duration of the event, *Human Acts* begins in 1980 and moves us through roughly 35 years to end in 2013, pausing to track the effects of torture and suppression as they register—physically, materially, psychologically, emotionally—on individuals in 1985, 1990, 2002, 2010, and 2013.

Unlike Caruth, however, Han refutes a situating of trauma solely in the purview of those who survive it; her second chapter is narrated by Jeong-dae, a middle school student who is friends with Dong-ho, the main character of the first chapter who spends his time working in a makeshift mortuary and whose murder that initially happens off-page drives the rest of the novel. Despite refusing to leave his post until he finds Jeong-dae, Dong-ho ultimately admits to himself—and the readers—that he has seen his friend die, shot by soldiers called in to police the city: "Bare feet—what had happened to his trainers?—seemed to be twitching...Lying in the hush of the room, you see Jeong-dae's face with your mind's eye. You see those pale blue tracksuit bottoms thrashing, and your breathing becomes constricted."<sup>23</sup> Dong-ho sees first his friend's bare feet, and it is only later that he is able to visualize Jeong-dae's face; in similar fashion to how his everyday life—routine and rational—has become jagged with the brutality that punctures the mundane so as to taint it, so too has Jeong-dae become piecemeal. This breaking apart is made literal in the subsequent chapter as Jeong-dae assumes the narrative voice, speaking to readers from his rotting body. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, "not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious;" whereas for Benjamin, the warning is about the desecration of history and the memory of the dead, for Han the danger that the dead face is also quite literal.<sup>24</sup>

Jeong-dae is but one of many that help make up a pyre of corpses, and Han moves uneasily from monstrous whole—"the tower of bodies was transformed into the corpse of some enormous, fantastical beast, its dozens of legs splayed out beneath it"<sup>25</sup>—to dismembered fragments—"I stared at my unchanging face. My filthy hands were as still as ever. Over my fingernails, dyed a deep rust by watery blood, red ants were crawling, silent"<sup>26</sup>—and back again—"that festering flesh now fused into a single mass, like the rotting carcass of some many-legged monster."<sup>27</sup> In the constant shifting between a whole that exceeds his individual body and the body parts that are literally disintegrating from rot and the weight of the bodies piled on top of him, I read Jeong-dae as epitomizing how an all-encompassing nationalist rhetoric wreaks havoc by disarticulating subjecthood and coupling it with his openness to subjection. As he lies with the other corpses, Han writes that Jeong-dae sees them, himself included, rendered as a "fantastical beast," as a "many-legged monster," stripped of any kind of identifying human marker; their only use now is to provide the fuel with which the military can hid their crime. The beast, the monster, is a mirror image of the government's brutal suppression, and Jeong-dae can only look upon the inert dead with a recognition that "as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, he is unable to see himself as a whole; rather, what becomes visible is how he has been rent, torn apart not only by the bullet that kills him, but also literally as he darkens, rots, chars, his face apart from his hands apart from his fingernails. Here, Allen Feldman's theorizing of violence during the Troubles in Northern Ireland is useful; he writes, "the act of violence transposes the body whole into codified fragments: body parts or aspects which function as metonyms of the effaced body or other large totalities."<sup>29</sup> Jeong-dae as both part of a larger body—the decomposing stack of corpses piled high in the gym—and the breaking apart into that which symbolizes a beastly, monstrous pain that destroys worlds—is perhaps what lies at the heart of the Gwangju Democratization

Movement and my learning of it so late in life: what does one do, as Dong-ho questions, when “you sing the national anthem for people who’d been killed by soldiers? Why cover the coffin with the Taegukgi? As though it wasn’t the nation itself that had murdered them.”<sup>30</sup>

I know I want to do something with *Human Acts*, but I’m not sure what it is. As with other texts I have encountered that look steadily back at me, my instinctive reaction is to write about it, but Han meets and adroitly sidesteps this desire. “I suppose you thought you were helping me?”, a political prisoner asks a professor who has come to interview him about his participation in the Gwangju Democratization Movement and his subsequent torture at the hands of the Korean government. “But when it came to it, this dissertation you were planning to write, was it really going to benefit anyone other than yourself?”<sup>31</sup> *I am not that*, I want to claim. *I am not a variant of Spivak’s benevolent intellectual*. Except maybe I am.<sup>32</sup> “The glare of perhaps disturbing introspection” is bright. Later, as Han inserts herself into the narrative as a writer, as her fictionalized self encounters Dong-ho’s older brother, now an adult, he implores her, “Please, write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother’s memory again.”<sup>33</sup> This, then, is the tension that *Human Acts* engenders in me: it is, as Benjamin states, about the desecration of the dead, about the fraught remembrance of the dead. But is it possible to separate the challenging of said desecration and my own potential professional and personal benefitting from such an action?

I think restlessly about this implied division over the next five days as I familiarize myself with Brixton, the site of the 1948 settling of the Windrush Generation and, in 1967, the location from which “[Obi] Egbuna and a group known as the Universal Coloured People’s Association (UCPA) launched Black Power.”<sup>34</sup> The restlessness lends itself to a constant walking through the neighborhood, beginning almost immediately after I unpack. And division, partition, is precisely the site of my ruminating, on what we now call North and South Korea with the gash of the DMZ in between,<sup>35</sup> the uneasy relationship of Scotland and England, the sites of contestation over independence and “Better Together.”<sup>36</sup> I walk to 165 Railton Road. To get to C.L.R. James’ old residence I must walk past Chaucer Road, Spenser Road, make a left on Shakespeare Road; Milton Road isn’t far behind. The names aren’t lost on me, and I’m cheered to see Fanon House on the way interrupting this imperial, “neutral” logic.<sup>37</sup> I later learn that Fanon House is part of an organization that serves Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) peoples living in the Lambeth area of London. I think about the violence of Fanon House nestled among these roads, the ways in which institutions nestle “diversity” within themselves as politically evacuated inclusivity. I think about the suture of kinship and fierce love.<sup>38</sup> It is August 28, 2016 when I arrive, and I think about the same day in 1955 and Money, Mississippi as I walk; he might have lived to see 75.<sup>39</sup> I think, too, of Ziggy Stardust, gone to Mars, the ruling planet of my sun sign, and as I walk during those five days I sometimes catch myself tunelessly humming, “oh leave me alone you know.” *Droogie*.<sup>40</sup>

I return to the novel more than once during my time in Brixton, and slowly I recognize that it’s not that I want to do something with it, but that I want it to do something for me; similar to James Gronniosaw, perhaps, I want *Human Acts* to speak. Édouard Glissant points out that “Western thought has led us to believe that a work must always put itself constantly *at our disposal*...It can happen that the work is not written *for someone*, but to dismantle the complex mechanism of frustration and the infinite forms of oppression.”<sup>41</sup> I want *Human Acts* to be at my disposal; more than anything, I want it to speak to me in a way that my parents will not, or cannot. They were of similar age to the university students protesting

the closing of Chonnam National University, which historians mark as the beginning of the uprising in Gwangju. When pressed, my *appa* tells me what by then I already knew: that martial law also included a curtailing of the free press, that other parts of Korea did not necessarily have immediate access to knowing what was happening in the South Jeolla province. My parents are sometimes like this, telling me details of their lives but rarely in historical context, and I am left to parse together some kind of larger meaning. I want to ask why they taught me Korean, insisted on my attending those Korean classes on Saturdays, if they are so unwilling to speak of a Korea that is concomitantly theirs and not. I never do, perhaps because their refusal to speak says more about my prerogative around asking, about my inability to ask but one question.

Initially my grievance seems to be mirrored in *Human Acts*; moments of abbreviated speech abound in the text. In one of its most compelling scenes, Eun-sook, who is first introduced as one of the handlers identifying and moving corpses in the first chapter alongside Dong-ho, re-emerges in 1985 as the editor of a play. Her chapter is sectioned into seven slaps, delivered "over and over in the exact same spot" by her inquisitor, so hard that "the capillaries laced over her right cheekbone burst, the blood trickling out through her torn skin."<sup>42</sup> The location on her skin connects her to the site of trauma; every slap is how she recounts and remembers. This is her punishment for being seen meeting with a translator who has been deemed traitorous to President Chun and his cabinet. The chapter consists of her attempting to forget both the physical and psychological pain endured, coupled with her inability to forget Dong-ho and all his disappearance represents; forgetting is always wed to a persistent remembering. When she goes to pick up the manuscript of the play that she and the translator had been discussing from the censor's office in Seoul City Hall,

[h]er initial impression is that the pages have been burned. They've been thrown onto a fire and left to blacken, reduced to little more than a lump of coal... From around the fiftieth page onwards, perhaps because drawing a line had become too labour-intensive, entire pages have been blacked out, presumably using an ink roller. These saturated pages have left the manuscript bloated and distended, water-logged flotsam washed up on some beach.<sup>43</sup>

She is left to wonder what might be recuperated, and I am taken back to the second chapter of the novel and Jeong-dae's musing on his own disintegration: "I looked on in silence as my face blackened and swelled, my features turned into festering ulcers, the contours that had defined me, that had given me clear edges, crumbled into ambiguity, leaving nothing that could be recognized as me."<sup>44</sup> The erasure of who Jeong-dae is, is cast in a similar language to the censoring of the manuscript: both are blackened, bloated, both are unrecognizable as who, or what, they originally were. But also, simultaneously, Jeong-dae thinks, "the bodies of ten people they'd just piled up seemed to be missing their heads. At first I thought they'd been decapitated; then I realised that, in fact, their faces had been covered in white paint, erased. I swiftly shrank back."<sup>45</sup> White, the traditional color of *handbok* worn as a sign of mourning.<sup>46</sup> What is it about white erasure that causes this horror? What is it about blankness that causes retreat? Jeong-dae recoils in disgust from the sight of his decomposition, but disgust and horror are not one and the same. White erasure and blankness feel analogous to the novel's quiet, its refusal to speak to readers like me, kept wanting in a diaspora rippling with histories of occupation, military and political interference, war.

Too, Han gestures to a palimpsestic presence in the blackened bodies, in the blackened pages. Inasmuch that Jeong-dae's spirit is present to witness the burning of his fleshly remains—and the wholesale murder of Dong-ho and other middle school children later in the novel—Eun-sook is startled into spilling her coffee on the desk back at the office: "Mr Seo's nimble fingers snatch the proof up again. To save it from getting stained. As though it still contains something. As though everything in it hasn't been nullified."<sup>47</sup> While Eun-sook dismisses the senior editor's action as nonsensical, I cannot help but think of Toni Morrison's reading of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; she quotes, "'[t]his visible [colored] world seems formed in love, the invisible [white] spheres were formed in fright'" and continues that *Moby Dick* "question[s] the very notion of white progress, the very idea of racial superiority, of whiteness as privileged place in the evolutionary ladder of humankind" and "meditate[s] on the fraudulent, self-destroying philosophy of that superiority."<sup>48</sup> Morrison's argument is that Melville is aware that Blackness bestows gifts of survival and abundance, whereas the ideology of whiteness promises nothing more than death. In *Human Acts*: from a thing imagined as bloated or darkened emerges the very thing that the military and censors cannot actually eradicate.

The play is staged, and Eun-sook attends. She spots the plainclothes police in the audience and fears for the playwright and translator. Despite their presence, the woman on the stage begins to speak. "Or so it seems. In actual fact, she cannot be said to say anything at all. Her lips move, but no sound comes out. Yet Eun-sook knows exactly what she is saying."<sup>49</sup> As the editor, she recognizes the lines because she is the one who has typed up the manuscript: "[a]fter you died I could not hold a funeral, / And so my life became a funeral."<sup>50</sup> Immediately after, an actor walks up the aisle toward the stage.

His lips gupper like a fish on dry land. Again, Eun-sook can read what those lips are saying, though speech is an uncertain name for the high-pitched sound shrieking out from between them... "Oh, return to me. / Oh, return to me when I call your name. / Do not delay any longer. Return to me now."<sup>51</sup>

It is one of those serendipitous moments that always seem to befall me when I am overseas; the book I need is on hand. I pull out my copy of Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* from my backpack and find it, highlighted years ago: "noise is essential to speech. Din is Discourse."<sup>52</sup> In Glissant's formidable conceptualization, he is describing a world system, an element of the peculiar institution that I am trained to research and teach back in California. The Gwangju Democratization Movement has a different timeline, a different context. I rebuke myself. I tell myself that to rely solely on Glissant is irresponsible scholarship even as I sit on the bed with his text open to the right of me, one edge held down by my thigh, the other by my overheating laptop, Han's novel face down on my left. I tell myself I will conduct more research once I am back at my own desk. Or perhaps it is not that I will need to rely on his work necessarily, as much as it is that he might show me a way in that is also a way out. My tea cools as I wait, the full-fat milk turning slightly scummy on the surface. I don't mind drinking cold tea. *You barbarian*, my ex used to say, bringing me a fresh cup. Yes, I would quip. *Were you waiting for me?* He never understood, which maybe was a sign.

Eventually, I have it. What Glissant provides for me is this: more than merely illuminating a way to think about the mute woman on stage, the shrieking man heading toward her, he pinpoints the source of my confusion. In his formulation, he writes of the Caribbean man: "no one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man

organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise."<sup>53</sup> Creole, as a language system saturated with the violence of slavery and anti-Blackness, registers initially as din, as discord. Subversively, however, if the master needed to make himself understandable, that also suggests that the slave, the Caribbean man, was also illegible. His speech, his cry, registered solely as "the call of a wild animal." Neither Glissant nor I are arguing that this is in any way wholly liberatory, but it does suggest unintelligibility as a site of what Ralph Ellison calls "the lower frequencies."<sup>54</sup> In Han's formulation, there are two people—the woman, the man. She is mute, but he both shrieks unintelligibly—"speech is an uncertain name"—and vocalizes the imploring song as demand.<sup>55</sup> How is this possible? Is the shriek a song? Does Han also divorce speech from legibility? Eun-sook and the others in the audience peer carefully, "gaze with great concentration on the actor's lips."<sup>56</sup> And then my second realization, which is so obvious that I'm embarrassed to admit that it did not cross my mind even once during those five days. When my mind alights on this error it immediately moves to refuse it, similar to how my students avoid meeting my eyes when I tell them they're looking too hard for an answer to a question I've posed. *It's right there in front of you*, I tell them sometimes, my tone in jest but my message not. It's true for me, too. It's right there in front of me.

I'm reading the novel in English.

### III.

I return to California in September, leaving behind the country "where I am happiest and where I am most alone."<sup>57</sup> I procure a copy of *Human Acts* in the original Korean. And even before I begin reading the novel, the first shift.<sup>58</sup> *Human Acts*, in English. *The Boy is Coming*, or *The Boy is Arriving*—"소년이 온다"—in Korean. Deborah Smith, Han's translator, admits to changing the English title because the literal translation is "awkward enough even without the euphemistic implications," and settles on *Human Acts*, "a phrase which to [her] embodied the neutrality, disorienting and even terrifying, inherent in the fact that these can be both tender and violent, brutal and sublime, committed by the same individuals."<sup>59</sup> To say that Han's novel embodies neutrality in any shape or form is the logic of whiteness at work; the boy, who I read as Dong-ho, is caught in the never-ending act of arriving in the novel, his ultimate fate not known to all of the other characters. Jeong-dae is the literal ghost in the novel, but Dong-ho is the ghost in Avery Gordon's formulation, "not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure" where "investigating can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life," the haunting accompaniment to the material changes occurring in Korea post-1980 and in the lives of the characters.<sup>60</sup> This dense site is also linked to how I read Han's original title as demonstrating that the "defiled space" of Gwangju "never goes away. Its reoccurrence negates time as distance."<sup>61</sup> Eun-sook, in June 1980, mere days after the uprising, calls the Provincial Office's Public Enquiry Department to report that the fountain in Gwangju is working perfectly: "'how can it have started operating again already? It's been dry ever since the uprising began and now it's back on again, as though everything's back to normal.'"<sup>62</sup> After weeks of calling, a "sympathetic yet sadly resigned" woman answers and tells her, "*There's nothing we can do about the fountain. You sound like you're still in school, no? It's best you forget, then.*"<sup>63</sup> For Eun-sook, there is no forgetting; Dong-ho and Gwangju reoccur, linear time is removed, and, as Feldman argues, "[t]he removal of time is the simulation of death."<sup>64</sup> But as Han demonstrates, as Benjamin demonstrates, death does not mean an end. Smith's claim that a literal translation of the title into English is

awkward due to its juvenile, sexual undertones serves to focus on the *human acts* of those involved in the Gwangju Democratization Movement, neutralizing the ideological formations of what constitutes *humanity*. In other words, this title suggests that Dong-ho and the dictatorship which murdered him are both human. While her refusal to ascribe to the novel a title that promotes a particular kind of grandstanding, singular narrative of resistance is commendable, Smith's erasure, the "white paint" of her title, does harm to Han's strategic deployment of Dong-ho as a metonymic of traumatic and traumatized time. "There is no way back to the world before the torture. No way back to the world before the massacre."<sup>65</sup> Closure is impossible, as is repair. What might be afforded us if we imagine repair as a verb—to repair in the name of justice, to argue for reparative justice, one which does not envision a "way back" as the aspirational goal? Or, in the forward momentum, *The Boy is Arriving*; he never arrives.

I flip idly through the novel, and then the second, more jarring shift: Smith has also mistranslated the chapter titles. Smith's reads as subjects caught in linear time: "The Boy. 1980," "The Boy's Friend. 1980," "The Editor. 1985," "The Prisoner. 1990," "The Factory Girl. 2002," "The Boy's Mother. 2010" and "The Writer. 2013." The corresponding titles in Han's version are, as best as I can translate, "Young Bird," "Black Breath," "Seven Cheeks," "Iron and Blood," "The Night's Pupil/Eye," "Toward Where the Flowers Bloom" and "The Snow-covered Lamp." What changes have been rendered here, from abstract to concrete, an affixing of the amorphous into the tangible? Smith's chapter titles name representation as the onus of the novel—individual figures who narrate each chapter are telling their own human stories. In Han's version, the chapter titles are imagistic, figurative—the focus is not on the respective narrator as she draws our attention elsewhere, perhaps to the din that conceals straightforward meaning. It is not that Han erases the absolute reality of the South Korean government's role in the massacre, but to turn again to Glissant, her chapter titles suggest what he has called in several locations "opacity:" "I thus am able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him."<sup>66</sup> Smith's translation project is, of course, about making the text accessible to those who are not fluent in reading Korean; at the same time, to translate the novel so carelessly into English, which is the literal language of the political and military force still present in Korea, one which is, as Han herself points out, linked to the massacre, is violent.<sup>67</sup> The move of removing all symbolic and figurative language from Han's chapter titles is less clarifying and more a forced elimination of the opacity that Glissant insists upon. Smith wants us to grasp and hold the very characters that Han indelibly writes as always on the move, dislocated in time and space because of their trauma, and unknowable precisely because of this, too. Bluntly stated, Smith, as a white British translator who was still relatively early in her learning of Korean as she undertook the project of translating *Human Acts*, whitewashes the political and temporal nuances of trauma in Han's novel, erasing the disorienting figurative language that Han uses to such provocative effect.

I spend time translating, paying careful attention to Eun-sook and her scene within the theatre. At times my mascara dots the pages of the novel, blurring the additional punctuation afforded by my pen. It is akin to one of Lydia Davis' most sparse and spare stories, "Collaboration With Fly"—"I put that word on the page, but he added the apostrophe."<sup>68</sup> The apostrophe supplied by the fly suggests a contraction—something has been removed—or a possessive—something, or someone, that belongs to something, or someone, else. I read 소년이 온다, in the original Korean, working as the former, restoring what Smith has removed, but not as the latter: this history does not necessary belong to

me, or perhaps to anyone reading it as *Human Acts*, or perhaps to anyone. To claim a trauma like the massacre in Gwangju as my own would be to ignore Caruth's claim that a history of trauma "can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence."<sup>69</sup> Or, as Morrison writes, "language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable."<sup>70</sup> Smith's translation is at odds with this conceptualization of what language makes possible. Concurrently, I believe that "we need to continually re-evaluate and re-conceptualize what happened in May 1980 in terms of our *personal histories* as well as in terms of global and local political and economic circumstances."<sup>71</sup> Too, in Davis' story, the fly works as a collaborator; it is what supplies the apostrophe, the "but" suggesting that this mark is the most significant thing on the page. My mascara dots, alongside my writing and re-writing within its pages, speak to a kind of collaboration with the novel. As Jennifer Devere Brody suggests, "punctuation appears in/as writing as a means of inscribing bodily affect and presence imagined to be lost in translation. Punctuation's performances situate and suture the indivisible doubled relation captured in and by the phrase 'embodied text.'"<sup>72</sup> In collaborating with the novel, in providing my own punctuation that undergirds my own bodily affect of weeping, I'm also attempting to think through what emerges when I read the novel, read myself, in this way.

One such moment, in Korean: Han writes, "Eun-sook reads the shape of his lips,"<sup>73</sup> but unlike the English translation, where the audience fixates on the "actor's lips,"<sup>74</sup> in the Korean, the audience gazes upon the "actors' lips."<sup>75</sup> It is but a simple shift, a fly moving slightly on the page, Roland Barthes' punctum, a "sting, speck, cut, little hole" that changes everything.<sup>76</sup> In the English translation, there is no confusion—the woman is simply called "the woman," and the man is identified through the gendered term "the actor." Thus it seems that while the woman is silently facing away from the audience, the audience attempts to read the simultaneous shriek and song coming from the actor's lips. In the Korean, although the woman still faces away from the audience, they focus on the "actors' lips," and, too, the actor does not shriek; instead, he emits a creaking noise. The multiplicity of actors' lips, a creak instead of a shriek.

I read this mistranslation in two ways. First, "actors' lips" suggest precisely what Smith's translation loses; rather than distinguishing the chapters into individual speaking voices, Han invokes what we might call a collective voice, one that is not singular in nature but nonetheless unified in purpose, that is to say, a dissemination of knowledges, embodied and otherwise, about the Gwangju Democratization Movement. At the same time, however, the impossibility of knowing, even though the play is staged a mere five years afterward: it is impossible, after all, for the audience to pay attention to multiple sets of lips, particularly when the woman on stage still has her back to them. I turn briefly to Anne Anlin Cheng's work on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, where in discussing Cha's disjointed, mellifluous discordance as a meditation on colonialist trauma and violence, Cheng writes that "in *Dictee*, acts of *recollection* (in the sense of memory recall) are frequently indistinguishable from acts of *collection* (in the sense of gathering up)."<sup>77</sup> I propose a similar understanding of the impossibility of reading the woman's lips while her back is to the stage, while the audience insists that they are reading the actors' lips. The collection and recollection occur together; memory is faulty but can be gathered up. Or, put another way—the fountain in Gwangju cannot be working again so soon; the fountain in Gwangju is working again so soon. Both/and. This is but a minute example and occurrence in a novel that abounds with such perplexity and refusal when read in Han's first language.

Reading the novel in Korean is distressing, and I knew it would be. Part of the hurt, I think, is that I don't believe it will do the *something* that I desired and desire, that I don't believe it will speak to me in the way that my parents will not, or cannot: "pain without marks is like speech without writing, doomed to pass into oblivion."<sup>78</sup> I don't know how much I agree with this sentiment, but it finds me writing and deleting, the tea switched for Laphroaig, the Bowie switched for another we mourn that year: maybe he and I are both like our fathers, our mothers, too demanding and never satisfied. I tell my students and I tell myself that language is never enough, that we will never fully be able to say what we mean.<sup>79</sup> I look into their sometimes disappointed faces and tell them that this actually holds a radical potential for us as writers because it affirms that complete clarity does not have to be the goal. It might be, instead, opacity, a right to refusal.

Yet this is difficult for me to accept as I continue the slow, arduous process of reading the novel in the language that I knew first, the one that still sounds as excessive love and loss, as love and guilt. When a friend and I decide to propose a seminar for an academic conference, we settle on the theme of partition and I feel an unloosening in my chest.<sup>80</sup> Yes, partition—the lens through which I can examine the novel and build to a critique, situate the knowledges I've known and gleaned through the years spent in university classrooms and hotel event spaces: that the Korean War was a proxy war; that South Korean troops were sent to fight in the Vietnam War when the United States came to collect its debts, as "we have too much debt"<sup>81</sup>; that the United States backed more than one dictatorship in Korea (as it continues to do so elsewhere); that the partition between North and South would remain in place so long as the United States had both a political investment and military presence at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and below. I initially write the conference paper in a straightforward manner, but it remains stilted, beset by the kind of jargon that I usually avoid. In an effort to allocate Han her right to opacity, I veer too far away from her, making warp and weft of what occurred in the years of 1950–1953, the late spring of 1980 and removing myself entirely. Still, I adhere to my former advisor's admonishing that I should keep everything I write, as there is always something salvageable. What emerges is this: a kind of diasporic memory work, a kind of autohistoria-teoría. To situate myself as impersonal author, ever, is a fraudulent decision that reaffirms structures of knowledge production that are steeped in normative categorizations of intellectual work defined by whiteness. Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate why, returning to Kay, Nunez and Baik, processing the impossibility of linguistic and cultural translation in *Human Acts* had to be written as a kind of life story that refuses multiple partitions.

And so, the knowledge I've known and gleaned through the years spent at my mother's side, massaging her legs, swollen from unending shifts at the various businesses my parents operated and had to abandon: that my maternal grandmother nearly died when she was told that my uncle had perished in the Vietnam War; that she nearly died again when it turned out that he hadn't; that my paternal grandmother had been orphaned as she and her family fled from what we now call North Korea, her hand slipping from her older sister's protective grasp; that she never saw her family again; that my parents and grandparents would not speak of particular things, no matter how I phrased my question; that I could not ask my question. And yet, despite this and because of this, I still am unsure what it means that I have written about the novel, and written about it in this way, when the answers I look and wait for are still coming, are still and never arriving, in all of the languages to which I have access.

## IV.

"What right do you have to demand that of me?"<sup>82</sup>

## Notes

1. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 67. [↗](#)
2. Jackie Kay and Petra Tournay-Theodotou, "Some Connection with the Place." *Transition: What is Africa to me now?* 113 (2014): 85 [↗](#)
3. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
4. Elizabeth Nunez, "Truth in Fiction, Untruths in Memoir." *Callaloo* 37.3 (2014): 501. [↗](#)
5. Crystal Baik, *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 6. [↗](#)
6. Baik argues that part of her work is examining how "U.S. militarized occupation generates its own seeds of demise, so to speak, by paradoxically producing *diasporic* excesses, or non-normative subjectivities and spaces deemed expendable to the U.S. and South Korean national agendas" (8). [↗](#)
7. Dana A. Williams, "Everybody's Protest Narrative: *Between the World and Me* and the Limits of Genre." *African American Review* 49.3 (2016): 179. [↗](#)
8. There are too many to name but here a few examples of new forms, genres, methodologies, fields that resist stagnant definitions in favor of porous possibilities: Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative; Audre Lorde's biomythography; Dionne Brand's longform poetics; The Combahee River Collective's unilaterally and collectively written manifesto; Stuart Hall's cultural studies; Hanif Abdurraqib's love letter-cum-investigative study. [↗](#)
9. Baik, *Reencounters*, 8. [↗](#)
10. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1979), 10. [↗](#)
11. Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 30. [↗](#)
12. Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts" in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 578. [↗](#)
13. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988): 68. [↗](#)
14. I choose the word "render" because I associate it with *making*, of *causing*, and the two amputated legs on the front cover are clearly made by their artist, and, given the content of Han's novel, we are asked to grapple with the cause, effect and affect of violence. But I'm also interested in how the word also means to *convert* flesh into something consumable (e.g. fat/lard)—as well as "rend," to tear, to cause emotional distress—for reasons that I address later in this article. [↗](#)
15. Han's novel points out the ways in which those living in Gwangju engaged in a militant defense of their city as a last resort; even these weapons were no match for the more sophisticated artillery of the Korean Armed Forces. [↗](#)
16. For more information, please see "Overlooked No More: Yu Gwan-Sun, a Korean Independence Activist Who Defied Japanese Rule" by Kang Inyoung, *The New York Times*, March 28, 2018. [↗](#)

17. Kim Dong-Choon, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 537. [↗](#)
18. Ju Hui Judy Han and Jennifer Jihye Kim, "Introduction: Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea," *The Journal of Korean Studies* (1979 –)19, no. 2 (2014): 249. [↗](#)
19. One specific location of emergence, most relevant to my work here and elsewhere, is in the scholarship on the entanglements between Black liberatory performances and movements in the United States and in England, Scotland, and Ireland. In *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories*, for example, Kathleen M. Gough argues that "women appear as specters that double the movements of a social life determined by ethos (derivative of male circum-Atlantic travel), and as the spirit through which the pathos of social life is formulated (the allegorical figure who endows circum-Atlantic surrogacy with meaning)" *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories* (Abingdon: Routledge: 2013), 9. [↗](#)
20. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4. [↗](#)
21. This language is borrowed from Patrick Wolfe's "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A structure, not an event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5, no 1.(2016). As Kauanui rightfully points out, colonialism as a structure—that is to say, an ongoing world-making and world-destroying—is an analytic undertaken and expanded by scholars within Indigenous and Native Studies. [↗](#)
22. Baik, *Reencounters*, 15. [↗](#)
23. Han Kang, *Human Acts*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2016), 37. [↗](#)
24. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255. [↗](#)
25. Han, *Human Acts*, 52. [↗](#)
26. Han, *Human Acts*, 55. [↗](#)
27. Han, *Human Acts*, 57–58. [↗](#)
28. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 35. [↗](#)
29. Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 69. [↗](#)
30. Han, *Human Acts*, 18. [↗](#)
31. Han, *Human Acts*, 114. [↗](#)
32. Moreover, I am not trained in Korean Studies, and the last time I worked on anything even remotely related was during my M.A. qualifying exams, when I created and read a list on Asian American literature, essentially a culling together of books I'd long loved and read into dog-eared, waterlogged scraps over the years. This did not, of course, stop students from insisting upon my "expertise" the first time I taught an Asian American literature course. [↗](#)
33. Han, *Human Acts*, 220. [↗](#)
34. Anne-Marie Angelo, "The Black Panthers in London, 1967 – 1972: A Diasporic Struggle Navigates the Black Atlantic." *Radical History Review* 103 (2009): 21. [↗](#)
35. I would like to say that I was canny, that I recognized immediately the unstable partition of Korea alongside the way Han partitions but leaves blurry the living and the dead, and how both carry the psychic wounds of this partition and complicate narratives of subjectivity. But I wasn't. My frustration was akin to something that many of us will have experienced: knowing that I couldn't stop thinking about this book, but not knowing why that was. [↗](#)
36. The 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum resulted in a record high voter turnout of almost 84%, with roughly 45% of voters voting for independence. The ongoing question of Scottish

independence also will come to form part of the conversation surrounding Brexit in 2016 and onward. [↗](#)

37. The critique of the inherently imperial logic of literary canons is not new. For example, "Chris Baldick has pointed to the importance of the admission of English literature to the Civil Service examinations in the Victorian period: armed with this conveniently packaged version of their own cultural treasures, the servants of British imperialism could sally forth overseas secure in a sense of their national identity, and able to display that cultural superiority to their envying colonial peoples." Terry Eagleton, *What is Literature?*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 25. [↗](#)
38. I am using here Bhanu Kapil's invocation of the term in *Incubation: A Space for Monsters*, as not only a bringing together but an insistence on the interstitial, on the always in flight nature of togetherness. In other words, I use "suture" here to decry permanence as the only measure of community and kinship; such an insistence I draw from my training in Black Studies. For critical examples of such theorizing, please see Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), and most recently, Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (2019). [↗](#)
39. In 2017, Carolyn Bryant admits to fabricating her accusations of Emmett Till threatening her, accusations which directly led to his torture, lynching and murder. For more information, please see "Woman Linked to 1955 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims Were False" by Richard Pérez-Peña, *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017. [↗](#)
40. "Droogie" invokes two texts: the first is David Bowie's "Suffragette City," from his 1972 album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. The narrator of the song regretfully informs his friend that since he is now in a relationship with a sexually liberated woman, their friendship must be cut short. The second is Anthony Burgess' linguistically fraught *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), wherein Alex and his friends—the "droogs" in question—celebrate and participate in "ultra-violence," which includes raping a woman in her own home. Brixton is still mourning the death of its former resident—the Bowie mural opposite the Brixton tube station is littered with bouquets of flowers when I go see it during one of my walks—and both the song and novel and their situating of women—and sometimes lack thereof—shade the sonic and geographic registers of reading *Human Acts*. [↗](#)
41. Édouard Glissant, "Cross-Cultural Poetics" in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 107. [↗](#)
42. Han, *Human Acts*, 69. [↗](#)
43. Han, *Human Acts*, 82–83. [↗](#)
44. Han, *Human Acts*, 63. [↗](#)
45. Han, *Human Acts*, 62. [↗](#)
46. It is no accident, I think, that Han's latest novel translated into English is literally titled *The White Book*, and explores, among other things, the death of her mother's first-born child. [↗](#)
47. Han, *Human Acts*, 87. [↗](#)
48. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 17–18. [↗](#)
49. Han, *Human Acts*, 105. [↗](#)
50. Han, *Human Acts*, 105. [↗](#)
51. Han, *Human Acts*, 106. I discuss translation further down in the article, but for the moment, I wish to point out that Deborah Smith's translation of this song is off the mark. A closer approximation reads, "Oh, return to me. / Oh, return to me now, as I am calling your name. / You cannot be any later, return now." It seems that Smith misses not only the letter, but the spirit, of the plea. [↗](#)

52. Glissant, "On Cross-Cultural Poetics," 123. [↗](#)
53. Glissant, "On Cross-Cultural Poetics," 124. [↗](#)
54. Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 581. [↗](#)
55. Han, *Human Acts*, 106. [↗](#)
56. Han, *Human Acts*, 106. [↗](#)
57. Neil Gaiman, "Introduction" in *Trigger Warning: Short Fictions and Disturbances* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2015), xxiv. [↗](#)
58. The charge of mistranslation has been levied against Deborah Smith more than once; in the case of Han's *The Vegetarian*, for example, Charse Yun states that "for one thing, Smith amplifies Han's spare, quiet style and embellishes it with adverbs, superlatives and other emphatic word choices that are nowhere in the original. This doesn't just happen once or twice, but on virtually every other page. Taken together, it's clear that Smith took significant liberties with the text." For more information, please see "How the Bestseller 'The Vegetarian,' Translated from Han Kang's Original, Caused an Uproar in South Korea," by Charse Yun, *The Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2017. Similar to Yun, I am less interested in a word-for-word translation, but rather am struck by the ways in which Smith's work loses the symbolic, the figurative, in favor of the literal. [↗](#)
59. Deborah Smith, "On Translating *Human Acts* by Han Kang." Asymptote. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/han-kang-human-acts/> < <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/han-kang-human-acts/>> (accessed March 17, 2019). [↗](#)
60. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8. [↗](#)
61. Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 67. [↗](#)
62. Han, *Human Acts*, 74. [↗](#)
63. Han, *Human Acts*, 103. [↗](#)
64. Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 137. [↗](#)
65. Han, *Human Acts*, 181. [↗](#)
66. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194. [↗](#)
67. As Donald N. Clark writes, "Since 1950, the South Korea-U.S. military marriage has had an additional institutional base. The joint defense of South Korea is under the coordinated command of an American four-star general. This commander has "operational control" over all forces in wartime and over front-line forces in peacetime. Consequently, when Gen. Chun Doo Hwan sent his army's 20th Division to crush the Kwangju (*sic.*) uprising, he first had to notify the American commander, Gen. John Wickham, that he was removing the division from Wickham's control. The American side insists that Wickham had no power to keep the division under his control and prevent this movement. However, Wickham's acknowledgment that he was notified is taken by many South Koreans to have constituted "approval" of Chun's use of massive military force against the demonstrators in Kwangju (*sic.*). For more information, please see "U.S. Role in Kwangju and Beyond," by Donald N. Clark, *The Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1996. [↗](#)
68. Lydia Davis, "Collaboration with Fly," in *Varieties of Disturbance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 8. [↗](#)
69. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 18. [↗](#)
70. Toni Morrison. Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Wed. 20 May 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture> < <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture>> . [↗](#)

71. You-Me Park. "Working Women and the Ontology of the Collective Subject: (Post)Coloniality and the Representation of Female Subjectivities in Hyon Ki-yong's *Paramt'anum Som (Island in the Wind)*" in *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 204. Italics mine. [↗](#)
72. Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 7. [↗](#)
73. 한강, *소년이 온다* (파주: 창비, 2014), 100. [↗](#)
74. Han, *Human Acts*, 106. [↗](#)
75. 한, *소년이 온다*, 100. [↗](#)
76. Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27. [↗](#)
77. Anne Anlin Cheng, "History In/Against the Fragment: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha" in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141. [↗](#)
78. Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85. [↗](#)
79. I'm thinking here, too, of Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" (1998), where a linguist realizes that we think sequentially because our language system is sequential; our language system is sequential because we think sequentially. When she encounters an alien life form she calls Heptapods, she soon learns that these beings think simultaneously and thus write simultaneously as well, making it so that they are able to see past and future at once. Chiang's short story asks us to consider the fallacy of expecting language to be in the service of providing linearity and clarity if those very things are occluded by the language structure itself. [↗](#)
80. Dr. Emma Stapely (University of California, Riverside) and I proposed and co-chaired a seminar, "Senses of Partition," for the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present Annual Conference in 2017, where I circulated an initial version of this paper to seminar participants. [↗](#)
81. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 61. [↗](#)
82. Han, *Human Acts*, 139. [↗](#)
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## How to Do Things with Walter Benjamin

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**ABSTRACT** Walter Benjamin is now a common reference point within cultural studies. But while a considerable secondary literature has emerged around his work, efforts to build upon his contributions by operationalizing the method they elaborate have remained relatively rare. Nevertheless, I maintain that it is solely through such operationalization that Benjamin's intellectual project can truly be understood. In this article, I provide a sketch of Benjamin's intellectual biography—with particular emphasis given to the purported tension between his metaphysics and his materialism—to highlight the overarching methodological coherence of his approach. In conclusion, I demonstrate how this method might be operationalized by cultural studies scholars today.

**KEYWORDS** methodology, theory, Walter Benjamin

*"I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."*

—Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

I

Although not yet a household name, Walter Benjamin had been elevated to the status of iconic figure within the American academy by the end of the twentieth century. Through his analysis of material culture, his engagement with the urban landscape, and his excavation of those revealing contradictions that find expression throughout the capitalist superstructure, Benjamin developed analytic tools that were of particular relevance to scholars in cultural studies. In her influential 1992 essay on the *Passagenwerk*, Angela McRobbie solidified this canonical status by casting Benjamin as an important precursor to (and ongoing resource for those working within) the field.<sup>1</sup> But while Benjamin is now an established and canonical reference point among cultural studies scholars, and while a considerable secondary literature has emerged around his work, efforts to clarify and build upon his insights by operationalizing them have remained relatively rare.<sup>2</sup>

I view this shortcoming as being significant for two reasons. First, and from a political standpoint, the moment of danger in which we now find ourselves (a moment characterized by fascist resurgence and the collapse of liberal-democratic norms) demands not only that we grasp our condition analytically; it also enjoins us to act so that the catastrophic outcomes presaged by our present do not come to pass.<sup>3</sup> Having confronted a similar moment of danger during his own lifetime, Benjamin developed intellectual tools for engaging in this work—and cultural studies scholars could play an

important role in fulfilling the theoretical and practical tasks he bequeaths us. Second, and from the perspective of analysis, I maintain that it is solely through its operationalization that Benjamin's intellectual project can truly be understood.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I substantiate these claims by providing an episodic sketch of Benjamin's lifelong intellectual project to reveal the coherent methodology that might be derived from it. From there, I demonstrate by way of example how this method might be operationalized today. In keeping with Benjamin's insistence that the materialist presentation of history should "purloin no valuables" nor resort to any "ingenious formulations," I have restricted myself to the consideration of details that for many readers will already be familiar. Nevertheless, when intellectual biography is approached less as an itinerary of influences than as a procedure for contemplating the unfolding implications of a thinker's guiding impulses, it becomes clear that (plausible distinctions between intellectual phases notwithstanding) even these mundane details can be prodded to reveal a coherent methodology that might be operationalized once understood.

## II

According to Benjamin biographer Pierre Missac, already by 1984, "a general critical bibliography" comprised of secondary sources on Benjamin contained "no less than 180 pages, despite lacunae that are certainly excusable."<sup>5</sup> To get a true sense of Benjamin's new cultural ubiquity, however, one must turn (as Benjamin himself might have) to a more anecdotal but undeniably illuminating realm.<sup>6</sup> Here, one discovers that, by 2011, the fashionable practice of name-dropping Benjamin in scholarly works had become widespread enough to be made the subject of literary satire.

In "Once We Were Swedes," Canadian author Zsuzsi Gartner mixes a solemn love story with a murder mystery, a college classroom, and impressionistic strolls through Vancouver as the city disintegrates. "It was the year the enterprising homeless constructed . . . tiny huts from purloined election signs," begins one vignette. Inevitably, "the design world took notice, with the San Francisco-based architectural magazine *Dwell* running a photo essay with text by Toronto's latest public intellectual." Putting the finishing touches on her snapshot, Gartner concludes by recounting how the *Dwell* author "supplied the requisite Walter Benjamin quote from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'" before ending with "some McLuhenesque wordplay."<sup>7</sup>

Included in *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* (a collection shortlisted, along with a work by Michael Ondaatje, for the 2011 Giller Prize), Gartner's story serves as a useful historical marker. Edgy and acerbic, the references she marshals are nevertheless presumed to be familiar—and the satirical form only works when its target is in a position to be dressed down. But while Gartner's riposte does much to reveal the scale and character of contemporary engagements with Benjamin's work, the reasons underlying this development must still be determined. Here, beyond Benjamin's literary virtuosity, his intellectual seductiveness, and his role in highlighting subject matter that would go on to become the bread and butter of cultural studies, one must acknowledge the sincerity with which Benjamin enlisted his readers as accomplices to—and therefore as active participants in—the act of discovery.

In 1934, Benjamin noted that, even as the newspaper had signaled the deterioration of *bourgeois* writing, it had nevertheless become a revolutionary medium in the Soviet

Union, where practical considerations had abolished the distinction between author and reader.<sup>8</sup> Adopting a similar posture in *One-Way Street* a few years earlier, Benjamin argued that “significant literary work” required “a strict alternation between action and writing.” Consequently, such work needed to “nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gestures of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards.” Indeed, “only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.”<sup>9</sup>

Reiterating this insight in a note added to *The Arcades Project* and sharpening it into a pointed maxim, Benjamin was convinced that—in assembling the material for his study—he “needn’t say anything. Merely show.”<sup>10</sup> This showing, I argue, presupposed the active engagement of the reader-viewer, and it pertained not solely to things but to method, not solely to *what* but to *how*. The process itself was designed for emulation, and it is this methodological impulse that has continued to make Benjamin’s work so seductive. But while seduction can sensitize us to the value of a methodological approach, it can never be the means by which the methodology is itself conveyed.

Committed as he was to showing rather than saying, Benjamin did not always elaborate the premises guiding his investigations directly. Nevertheless, reviewing his output from the 1915 essay on the “Life of Students” right through to his final testament in the “Theses” of 1940 makes clear that his intellectual project was governed by (and therefore can be made to disclose) an overarching methodological coherence.<sup>11</sup> This coherence makes it possible to operationalize and thus to extend the project itself, to emulate Benjamin not through the ornamental deployment of his insights (as frequently happens) but through the very process of thinking and doing. Still, Benjamin’s approach left much room for uncertainty. At one point, Theodor Adorno claimed that it amounted to little more than a “wide-eyed presentation of mere facts,”<sup>12</sup> and even Benjamin once conceded that it was better described as “a trick than a method.”<sup>13</sup> For those seeking to operationalize Benjamin, the attributes of this trick must be clarified.

### III

In the introduction to their *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings propose that the enormous secondary literature on Benjamin was “notable for its lack of unanimity on any given point.” Nevertheless, they observe, many of the contributions to this literature were united in their tendency to “proceed in a relatively selective manner, composing a thematic order that usually eliminates whole regions of [Benjamin’s] work.” In an effort to correct the “distorted portrait” this approach has yielded, the authors commit to “a more comprehensive treatment by proceeding in a rigorously chronological manner, focusing on the everyday reality out of which Benjamin’s writings emerged.”<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, they argue, “the pronounced multiplicity” of Benjamin’s output “does not exclude the possibility of an inner systematic, or of a textual consistency.”<sup>15</sup> Here, and “regardless of theme or subject matter,” Eiland and Jennings note that, “from first to last, [Benjamin] was concerned with experience, with historical remembrance, and with art as a privileged medium of both.”<sup>16</sup>

Like Eiland and Jennings, I endorse efforts to identify the underlying coherence of Benjamin’s project while guarding against the tendency to marshal his insights in a selective fashion. Nevertheless, it should be noted that their commitment to a “rigorously

chronological" corrective stands in sharp contrast to Benjamin's own preferred approach. Indeed, through constant retrospective reevaluation and the reincorporation of prior insights, Benjamin made his own intellectual biography an affront to conventional temporalities. In contrast to the position advanced by Eiland and Jennings, Benjamin cautioned against the desire to write histories "that showed things 'as they really were,'" since doing so meant succumbing to "the strongest narcotic of the century."<sup>17</sup>

By constellating his own work, Benjamin demonstrated that it was possible to transform the character and significance of his earlier observations. Among his notes for the *Arcades Project*, he wrote, "everything one is thinking at a specific moment of time must at all costs be incorporated into the project at hand. Assume that . . . one's thoughts, from the very beginning, bear this project within them as their telos."<sup>18</sup> Similarly (and despite the fact that Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study belonged to an earlier metaphysical stage that he had supposedly transcended by the 1930s), he sought to "see the nineteenth century just as positively as [he] tried to see the seventeenth century in the work on *Trauerspiel*."<sup>19</sup> He went on to add, "The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century but with greater distinctness."<sup>20</sup>

Given these complex overlaid temporalities, approaching Benjamin as Eiland and Jennings propose cannot help but distort the fundamental source of his project's intellectual coherence. This coherence owes not to a catalogue of successive influences, nor to the persistence of its content and themes (experience, historical remembrance, art); instead, it arises from a *methodological* orientation. This method did not emerge fully formed; however, its successive development through each stage of Benjamin's intellectual journey suggests that it is best understood not in terms of progress but actualization.<sup>21</sup> Let's now consider its development across various moments.

In his dissertation on "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" published in 1920, Benjamin began formalizing a means by which to force objects to reveal their concretely synecdochal status. Recalling the Romantic orientation to criticism, which aimed less at invalidating contributions than at completing them by uncovering the broader reality they encapsulated and reflected, he embarked on a journey that would ultimately lead to profane illumination.<sup>22</sup> "The Romantics' endeavors to reach purity and universality in the use of forms," he wrote, "rests in the conviction that, by critically setting free the potential and many-sidedness of these forms (by absolutizing the reflection bound up in them), the critic will hit upon their connectedness as moments within the medium."<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin's engagement with Romanticism provided a strong methodological foundation for his subsequent materialism. It's important to recall, however, that his interest in what we might think of as synecdochal analysis was already well established by 1915 when, in his essay on the life of students, he sought to foreground those moments in which history itself seemed "concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in . . . utopian images." Such an approach was indispensable, he thought, since it helped to reveal how "elements of the ultimate condition . . . are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind." Consequently, "the historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present."<sup>24</sup>

Rendered though it was in a breathless metaphysical idiom, the posture that Benjamin assumed when considering the life of students both anticipated and oriented him toward

the Romantic conception of reflection with which he would grapple five years later. Finally, with the analytic elaboration of the dialectical image in the work he conducted during the 1930s, his approach began to take on a strong materialist inflection. By 1940, Benjamin was convinced that, as a result of the method he had devised, it was possible to find (not only analytically but practically, not only metaphysically but materially) "in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history."<sup>25</sup> For this reason, and at their threshold, analysis and struggle become inseparable. "Only for a redeemed mankind," he observed, could the past "become citable in all of its moments."<sup>26</sup>

If every opportunity (and, *a fortiori*, everything) was always and at least implicitly present in everything else, then "every second of time" could conceivably become "the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."<sup>27</sup> All that was required (but this was no small thing) was the ability to acknowledge the animating desire, identify the unresolved means through which it might be fulfilled, and commit to the decision this fulfillment demanded. Only apparently paradoxical, it was through metaphysical and theological invocations of this kind (through forays into the realm of redemption and the absolute) that Benjamin strove to complete the Marxism of his time, which had subordinated its spirit of struggle and sacrifice to a mechanistic conception of progress. These efforts were not always well received, or even understood, by his peers.

## IV

In his introduction to Benjamin's collected works, Adorno admitted that his friend's philosophy "invited misreading" because it dared the reader to "reduce it to a succession of desultory aperçus, governed by the happenstance of mood and light." Despite this perceived eclecticism, however, he maintained that "every one" of Benjamin's insights "had its place within an extraordinary unity of philosophical consciousness."<sup>28</sup> Adorno never specified the precise character of the unity to which he referred; however, the propensity toward "misreading" against which he cautioned proved to be real enough. It owed not least to the fact that Benjamin's desire to show rather than tell left him open to enlistment by rival intellectual camps, where opportunistic partisans would distort his method through the selectivity of their invocations.

Standing prominently on the side of metaphysics and theology, Gershom Scholem felt that Benjamin needed to be rescued from his Marxist readers, his friends, and even from himself. During the 1930s, Scholem even declared that Benjamin's Marxist allegiances had blunted the latter's most penetrating insights. He was not alone in this assessment, however, and Adorno-the-Marxist critiqued Benjamin for similar reasons. In a letter dated August 2, 1935, Adorno admonished Benjamin for de-theologizing his conception of the dialectical image in the arcades project exposé he had composed that year.<sup>29</sup> Summarizing the problem in a letter dated November 10, 1938, Adorno wrote: "your solidarity with the Institute of Social Research, which pleases no one more than myself, has induced you to pay tributes to Marxism which are not really suited to either Marxism or to yourself."<sup>30</sup>

Given the tensions between metaphysical-theological and Marxist interpretations of Benjamin's work, the confluence between Scholem and Adorno's assessments here is both surprising and suggestive. Despite their differences, both thinkers struggled to envision how their friend's apparently divergent postures might be maintained. But while Adorno

conceded that Benjamin's theology might be complementary, if not to Marxism per se, then at least to the aims of the Institute for Social Research, Scholem would countenance no such rapprochement. From his perspective, Benjamin's thought proceeded along two separate and incompatible tracks. And since no synthesis was possible, only one side of his friend's "Janus face" could be saved.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the "two-track aspect of Benjamin's thinking, in which mystical intuition and rational thought [were] frequently only seemingly connected by dialectic," it was obvious to Scholem that Marxism needed to be purged.<sup>32</sup>

Recoiling from what he took to be the unresolved character of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, Scholem attacked his correspondent's new "concept of aura," which seemed to have been de-theologized. Indeed, since Benjamin had used the concept in an "entirely different sense for many years," Scholem was dismayed to find that a "pseudo-Marxist" iteration had developed in its place. As far as Scholem was concerned, this new conception "constituted, logically speaking, a subreption" that allowed his friend to "sneak metaphysical insights into a framework unsuited to them." It was thus to his great dismay that "Benjamin emphatically defended his orientation."

He said that his Marxism was not dogmatic but heuristic and experimental in nature, and that his transposition into Marxist perspectives of the metaphysical and even theological ideas he had developed in the years we spent together was in fact meritorious, because in that sphere they could become more active, at least in our time, than in the sphere originally suited to them.<sup>33</sup>

Conceived in response to an aggressive interlocutor and beholden to Scholem's paraphrase, Benjamin's reply nevertheless suggests that he understood the relationship he had forged between metaphysics and Marxism in terms of reflection—and thus of possible absolution—rather than of rupture or subreption. Earlier metaphysical considerations had not to be abandoned in the move to Marxism; instead, they were given an opportunity to come into their own. In this way (and though he did not state it directly), Benjamin made clear that the method he had devised for absolutizing *objects* could be applied to *epistemological standpoints* as well. Forced into constellation with Marxism (its putative antonym), theology discovered the point of sublation for which it had always longed. In a similar fashion, Marxism too was saved from the deformations it suffered at the hands of those who subjected it to a catechistic recitation.

Such a resolution infuriated Scholem. In a letter to Benjamin dated November 1937, he complained that his friend's essay on the historian and collector Alfred Fuchs had highlighted the limits of his Marxist allegiance in no uncertain terms. "It is to the detriment of your work," Scholem winced, "that you have cast your insights before dialectical swine. . ."

What strikes me strongly is this: Marxist insights always remain mired in methodology and never reach the realm of the factual. . . . Where the factual appears, it explodes the limit of the so-called method. . . . I would feel better without it, and I am sadly convinced: you would as well.<sup>34</sup>

Scholem's campaign against dialectical swine continued beyond Benjamin's death in 1940. In opposition to the new generation of militants who began rediscovering Benjamin during the post-war period, Scholem doubled down on his conviction that his friend's work could only be understood in rarified metaphysical-theological terms. Moreover, he asserted,

Benjamin's true commitments (led astray though once they'd been) were even antithetical to Marxism. By Missac's account, this position became so extreme that Scholem even took Benjamin's "Theses" to be an "unqualified retraction of the errors he had committed."<sup>35</sup> By the 1960s, Scholem's certainty had become absolute. "Nothing remains of historical materialism" in Benjamin's final essay, he gloated, "except the term itself."<sup>36</sup>

## V

Scholem's anti-Marxism led him to produce a doubtful reading of the "Theses" and of Benjamin's work more generally.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, his tirade against "dialectical swine" forces us to recall the distorted Marxism of those demagogues who furnished the backdrop against which Benjamin was writing. In his *Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress* of 1930, for instance, Stalin confirmed that "the highest development of state power" was in fact the precondition "for the withering away of state-power." Such a position was contradictory, he conceded, but "this contradiction is bound up with life, and it fully reflects Marx's dialectics." Enjoining fratricide to parade about as analysis, Stalin concluded his assessment on the following ominous note: "anyone who fails to understand these dialectics . . . is dead as far as Marxism is concerned."<sup>38</sup>

In light of Stalin's decree, Scholem's misgivings about Marxism and dialectical reasoning may appear to be well founded. When applied to Benjamin's texts, however, this same posture becomes wholesale analytic distortion. Along with downplaying Benjamin's "heuristic and experimental" knack for forging illuminating connections (not only between disparate artifacts but whole schools of thought), Scholem also failed to appreciate the remarkable degree to which his friend had managed to foreground aspects of Marx's own work that had become obscured by Soviet orthodoxy. Ultimately, Benjamin's allegiance to Marxism owed neither to self-loathing nor devotion as Scholem and Adorno had respectively maintained. Instead, it arose from his impressive ability to salvage ideas *within Marxism itself* that had become "endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed" under the shadow cast by Stalinism.<sup>39</sup>

Rediscovering Marx through Benjamin is therefore highly illuminating. In addition to foregrounding the degree to which—by the beginning of the twentieth century—Marx had been pummeled by his vulgarizers,<sup>40</sup> the procedure also reveals the regularity with which Marx himself generated insights that (in retrospect) cannot help but seem quintessentially *Benjaminian*. Among the many traces of this intriguing co-implication, perhaps the most telling is to be found in the following comments, which Marx conveyed in a letter to Engels dated March 25, 1868: "Human history is like paleontology," he wrote. "Owing to a certain judicial blindness even the best intelligences absolutely fail to see the things which lie in front of their noses. Later, when the moment has arrived, we are surprised to find traces everywhere of what we failed to see."

The first reaction against the French Revolution and the period of Enlightenment bound up with it was naturally to see everything as mediaeval and Romantic. . . . The second reaction is to look beyond the Middle Ages into the primitive age of each nation, and that corresponds to the socialist tendency, although these learned men have no idea that the two have any connection. They are therefore surprised to find what is newest in what is oldest—even equalitarians, to a degree which would have made Proudhon shudder.<sup>41</sup>

Predating Benjamin's own methodological excursions by more than half a century, this single compressed passage alerts us to the ease with which Marx oriented toward Benjaminian themes like correspondence and the trace, the simultaneity of the old and the new, and the decisive moment in which revelation bursts forth. Admittedly (and when guided by orthodox conceits), this letter may seem atypical when compared to other works in the Marxist canon. Nevertheless, it reiterates insights that can already be detected in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of 1852.<sup>42</sup> And even if we accept Althusser's thesis (which I don't) that Marx can only be understood from the standpoint of an epistemological break dividing his early work (still beholden to German idealism) from his later materialist output,<sup>43</sup> we must still contend with the fact that the "paleontology" letter (concerned though it was with problems of perception) was drafted one year *after* the 1867 publication of *Capital, Volume I*, Marx's most revered "mature" text.<sup>44</sup>

## VI

Benjamin's engagement with absolutizing reflection was tied from the beginning—and as early as his essay on the life of students—to an awareness of the important role that images (whether visual or literary) played in the struggle for redemption. In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," he proposed that images enabled people to anticipate the future by recalling traces of a mythical past whose promise had yet to be fulfilled. For this reason, he thought, actors in the present tended to develop the habit of "quoting primeval history."<sup>45</sup> These citations could prompt recollections of the promise inherent (but as yet unrealized) within the prior form. "Each epoch not only dreams the next," Benjamin wrote, "but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking."<sup>46</sup>

In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, that latter appears wedded to elements from prehistory, that is, of a classless society. Intimations of this, deposited in the unconscious of the collective, mingle with the new to produce the utopia that has left its traces in thousands of configurations of life, from permanent buildings to fleeting fashions.<sup>47</sup>

Analytically, such images can be used to clarify the desires that compel people to persevere. Politically, they can be mobilized to stimulate action in pursuit of those aims. However, as Susan Buck-Morss has pointed out, while "the real possibility of a classless society in the 'epoch to follow' the present one revitalizes past images as expressions of the ancient wish for a social utopia in dream form . . . a dream image is not yet a dialectical image, and desire is not yet knowledge."<sup>48</sup> In order to move from one state to the other, the attributes associated with the dialectical image must first be made clear.

In his arcades project, his essay on the concept of history, and elsewhere, Benjamin advanced a series of propositions concerning dialectical images, their characteristics, and

their effects.<sup>49</sup> Constellating fragments of matter and memory to prompt an absolutizing reflection, he imagined that such images could force people to consider how they might act upon history as such. In one early formulation, Benjamin clarified, "it's not that what is past casts light on the present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."

In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to the wish images described in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (images that refracted their profane promise through the analytic distortions of a dream state shaped by myths and visions), the dialectical image was inseparable from the recognition of the revolutionary possibility inherent in what Benjamin called "the now." Commenting on the distinct but interrelated character of these two image forms, Buck-Morss proposed that, with the dialectical image, wish images were "negated, surpassed, and at the same time dialectically redeemed"<sup>51</sup>—which is to say: the dialectical image completes the wish image dream by exposing it to the shock of recognition. In this way, it makes both the *promise* and the *means* by which it might be fulfilled visible all at once.

By acceding to the demand the dialectical image brought in its wake, Benjamin imagined that people might come face to face with "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."<sup>52</sup> For this reason (and as early as 1929), he proposed that revolution meant discovering "in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images."<sup>53</sup> Only from within this sphere, he thought, was it possible to address history, "the world of universal . . . actualities," directly.<sup>54</sup> Such an account can't help but disclose a metaphysical provenance. But if Benjamin's Marxism was more than a broken homage, how then should this appeal to the universal be understood?

According to Buck-Morss, Benjamin envisioned communism as a "harmonious reconciliation of subject and object through the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity."<sup>55</sup> Conceived in this way, communism is itself a project of absolution, a pathway to reconciliation made possible through the profane discovery-creation of the world's perfect, non-contradictory identity. By collapsing the distinction between revolution and absolution, and by marshaling a reflection that augured completion, Benjamin rediscovered what Buck-Morss took to be an important "ur-historical motif" in Biblical myth. As the wish image makes clear, however, such motifs can't simply be deployed "symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation," since doing so risks refurbishing the dream from which people strive to awaken. Instead, these motifs must be rediscovered "actually, in matter's most modern configurations."<sup>56</sup> It is from within this realm that the dialectical image arises, and it is here that the metaphysical appeal to the universal finds its own point of sublation.

## VII

Despite his invocation of carefully selected profane objects, Benjamin remained hard pressed to provide concrete examples of dialectical images that could yield the effects with which he associated the concept. Still less was he able to demonstrate how such an

image might reliably be *produced*. Indeed, when reading the "Theses," it's difficult to avoid the impression that dialectical images are discovered solely by chance. But if such images are only ever haphazard discoveries upon which one stumbles "at a moment of danger" (and if, still more, they threaten after having flashed up "never to be seen again"), attempts to operationalize Benjamin may seem pointless.<sup>57</sup>

A solution suggests itself by turning to Benjamin's treatment of "thinking," a concept he used to denote the active, subjective moment in the reflection process. No mere contemplative act, thinking for Benjamin was an operational premise, the concrete means by which the citable elements of material history were brought into constellation. On this basis (and despite the limits he confronted with respect to his own creations), it becomes clear that, through his ongoing experiments with literary montage, Benjamin was actively struggling not only to *discover* but also to *produce* dialectical images in writing.<sup>58</sup> In the following sketch for what would become thesis XVII of his essay on the concept of history, Benjamin makes the connection between thinking and dialectical images clear:

Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image.<sup>59</sup>

Along with clarifying the bonds that unite thinking, construction, and the dialectical image, Benjamin's comments also confirm that the dialectical image is marked by two discrete phases. When considered from the standpoint of its *apprehension*, the image is confronted as an immediate and absolute presence (and it's for this reason that Benjamin so frequently invoked shock as an analytic category). When considered from the standpoint of its *production*, however, the shock of recognition reveals itself to be epiphenomenal, a salutary effect of the mediated constellation process. Observing this same duality in her own treatment of Benjamin's project, Buck-Morss recounts how, "as an immediate, quasi-mystical apprehension, the dialectical image was intuitive. As a philosophical 'construction,' it was not."<sup>60</sup>

In addition to the internal division between the moment of thinking-construction and the subsequent moment of apprehension-recognition to which it gives birth, however, the dialectical image appears to be riven once more. Here, one detects a split between the initial phase of analytic apprehension and the subsequent decision through which the image's status is confirmed. As with Fanon, for whom "each generation must . . . discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it,"<sup>61</sup> the dialectical image demands both the discovery of the animating desire *and* the subsequent fulfillment of that desire through struggle. The shorter the interval between these two phases, the more perfectly the image corresponds to Benjamin's conception.

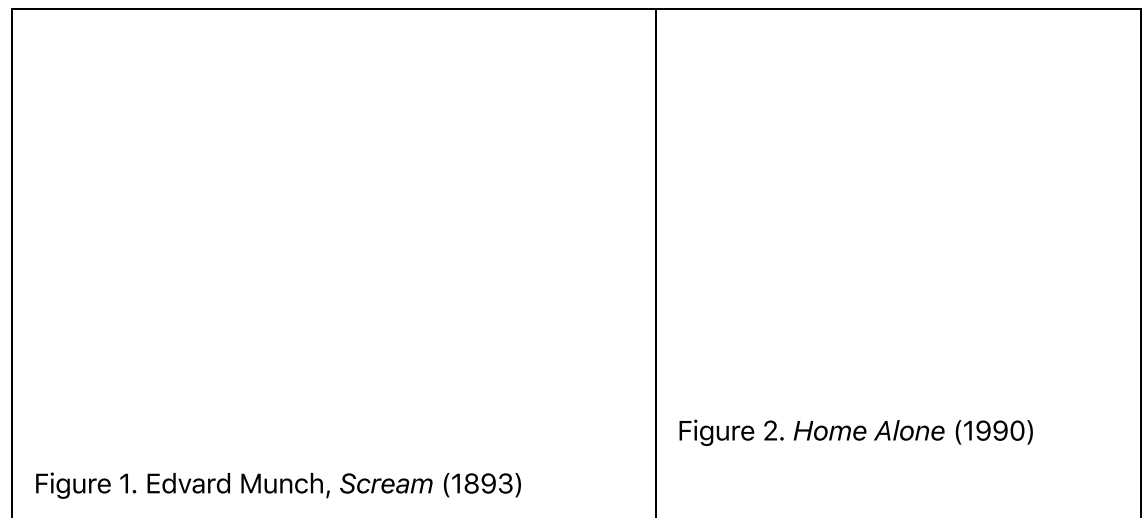
The secondary literature on Benjamin has thus far and for the most part ignored the centrality of the latter demand, which pertains to struggle. This may suggest that Benjamin's mode of analysis is better suited to heuristic excitation than to insurrectionary plotting—and that, for every comrade willing to take a "leap in the open air of history,"<sup>62</sup> there will always be another one begging to know what the hell you're talking about. Then again (and this is the wager), perhaps the uncertainty with which we confront the dialectical image today is itself but a symptom of our ongoing struggle to wake up.

## VIII

In the interest of demonstrating how Benjamin's method might be operationalized and thus further comprehended and made actionable today, I want to fashion a constellation out of historical fragments chosen precisely because, at first glance, they may seem distant from our main point of inquiry. In addition to keeping us from becoming ensnared in a reactive posture vis-à-vis contemporary horrors, this distance shall also help to confirm the truth of Benjamin's insight that—through careful selection and absolutizing reflection—even the most inconspicuous fragments can help bring the present into a critical state.

In assembling this construction, I have been guided by Benjamin's methodology (though, as Benjamin maintained, it really is better called a "trick" than a method). By showing how this method can be used to guide "thinking," I hope to demonstrate how it might be cultivated and operationalized in other contexts. In the case of this particular constellation, I pay special attention to those lingering visual traces that undermine linear conceptions of time while prompting the past to "bring the present into a critical state." Concretely speaking, this means that the analysis leads inexorably toward the moment of decision demanded by politics. And while there may well be other ways to arrive at this point, I hope to make clear that Benjamin's approach—once operationalized—can't help but deposit us there as a matter of course.

What, then, should we make of the curious historical relay that binds the *Scream* Edvard Munch unleashed in 1893 to the signature gesture that would launch a miserable child actor to stardom nearly a hundred years later?



It is useful to begin by considering the social and political realities to which these images give expression.<sup>63</sup>

According to art historian Øivind Storm Bjerke, *The Scream* positioned Munch firmly within the symbolist tradition, which he took to be "a chiefly reactionary trend within the art of the late 19th century." Such an appraisal owed to the fact that, as a movement, symbolism "rejected modern industrialized society and looked back on the pre-industrial era with nostalgia." Rather than "confronting contemporary social injustice" directly, the symbolists

instead became a "late-Romanticist attempt to seek comfort in the idea of something original and genuine; a condition of harmony between human beings and nature, which industrialism . . . had ended."<sup>64</sup>

To judge the validity of this account, one might recall a poetic sketch that Munch scrawled in his journal around the time he painted *The Scream*. Beset by turmoil, and walking by the sea one evening during "a time when life had ripped [his] soul open," Munch saw a sun that, in setting, looked to him like "a flaming sword of blood slicing through the concave of heaven." Indeed, the sky itself took on a hue "like blood—sliced with strips of fire" while "the hills turned deep blue" and the fjord itself became "cut in cold blue, yellow, and red." Surrounded by this scene of "exploding bloody red," Munch confessed to having "felt a great scream."

And I heard, yes, a great scream—the colors in nature—broke the lines of nature—the lines and colors vibrated with motion—these oscillations of life brought not only my eye into oscillations it brought also my ears into oscillations—so I actually heard a scream.<sup>65</sup>

Such foreboding may not have been without foundation. As art historian J. Gill Holland has noted, "the supposed spot over the Oslo Fjord where the screamer stands was located above a slaughterhouse and a mental hospital, and sounds from each were said to be audible on the road above."<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere in his journal, Munch recounted a vivid slaughterhouse scene that seems to corroborate Holland's apocryphal account. In a poem grimly entitled "The Smile," Munch stands transfixed as an ox is "led in with its head half through the door so that the rear remains in the slaughter room and the head peeping out of the door into the passage."<sup>67</sup> At the moment of death, the slaughtered animal yields *The Scream's* wild palette:

—It shines in  
the white and  
yellow white fat and tallow—against the powerful  
red and violet blue  
flesh—which drips  
blood water.<sup>68</sup>

These experiences would take their toll. By the turn of the century, Munch began recounting feelings that were tantamount to being home alone in the world. In the period following his *Scream*, he even admitted that he had "[given] up hope of ever being able to love again."<sup>69</sup> Under such conditions, it was natural that his journal became a cartographic sketch of the world's emptiness. "I walked one evening lonesome by the sea," he recalled. "It sighed and swished among the rocks—there were long gray clouds along the horizon—it was as if everything had died—as in another world—a landscape of death."<sup>70</sup>

Searching desperately for one real thing and recoiling from modernity's ominous shadow, Munch's affective posture became a textbook example of what Bjerke took to be symbolism's reactionary anti-capitalism. Viewed from the standpoint of the present, where poor-little-rich-girl stories are more likely to elicit sneers than sympathy, suffering of this kind may now seem quaint. Nevertheless, contemporary developments have done little to invalidate—and much less to resolve—the anxieties to which Munch succumbed. By following citations and image traces in the Benjaminian fashion, we learn that *The Scream*

Munch unleashed at the dawn of the twentieth century would go on to become one of the most frequently referenced images of all time.

According to art critic Tina Yarborough, "numerous artists" during the latter half of the twentieth century "presented, paraphrased, and made a pastiche of Munch's art." Taken together, these citations ensured that Munch himself would become "one of the twentieth century's most oft-cited artists."<sup>71</sup> For Yarborough, "Munch's message and its popularity" are nowhere more apparent than in the "ubiquitous appropriation" of *The Scream*. Back in 1895, Munch made a lithograph of the work to facilitate its reproduction. This initial act would augur countless repetitions. Today, *The Scream* has become "commonplace in . . . mass culture" while at the same time being "appropriated . . . by well-known artists." As a result, the image now infuses "the realms of both high and low art" simultaneously.

*The Scream* in mass culture has spawned everything from television commercials . . . to political cartoons and advertising campaigns. . . . Television personality Dame Edna Everage fashioned *The Scream* into a dress, and the motif has even prompted published personal responses to the intellectual satisfactions derived from the "Scream Giant Inflatable Blow-up Dolls."<sup>72</sup>

How are we to understand this proliferation? According to Yarborough, "even though [*The Scream*] may have begun as a naturalistic autobiographical experience, by the final painting, Munch had rejected narrative content and depersonalized its meaning." By presaging the absolute, the image thus became "a more general investigation into the precarious conditions of individuality" under "capitalist systems of control."<sup>73</sup>

In 1986, artist Andres Serrano exhibited a work entitled *The Scream* featuring "a dead coyote . . . strung up by a noose." For Yarborough, Serrano's image was "a primal shriek that . . . reache[d] back through America's ugly history" even as it invoked "current border clashes."<sup>74</sup> In this moment, as citation gives way to connotation, the entirety of history seems to become compressed within the image frame. Indeed, in Serrano's reprise, Yarborough found evidence that "Munch's symbols reverberate across historical lines."<sup>75</sup> For this reason, and despite the dramatic contextual shift it enacts, the Serrano can be said to hold true to the substance of Munch's original.

Figure 3. Andres Serrano. *The Scream* (1996)

But this appropriation did not exhaust the citation's range.

## IX

Directed by John Hughes and released on November 16, 1990 (nearly a hundred years after Munch's *Scream*), *Home Alone* grossed \$17 million during its opening weekend and remained number one at the box office for twelve weeks straight. The film's success owed nothing to critics, who did little to conceal their sneering contempt. According to Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly*, Hughes had delivered little more than a "sadistic festival of adult-bashing."<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless (or perhaps for this very reason), the movie earned \$285,761,243 at the domestic box office and became the top-grossing film of the year. It remains the highest-grossing live-action comedy of all time.

The film's opening scene invites viewers into a bourgeois home bursting with activity but bereft of connection. After being ignored and belittled by family members gathered for an impending vacation, a prepubescent Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) declaims, "this house is so

full of people it makes me sick. When I grow up and get married, I'm living alone!" The scene degenerates, and Kevin yells at his mother: "I don't want to see you again for the rest of my whole life." Once settled in bed, his sentiment becomes a conscious, verbalized wish: "I wish I could make them all just disappear."

Like *Peter Pan* before it, *Home Alone* derives both its tension and its dramatic appeal from the entwined agonies of bourgeois domestic boredom and the Oedipal drama. For both J.M. Barrie and John Hughes, parents are cast as ambivalent objects. Dispatched as irrelevant, they nevertheless remain sources of fantastic longing. In both stories, domestic restriction prompts wishful projection. At their threshold, the fantasies take on a life of their own. Upon discovering that his wish seems to have come true, Kevin settles into an ersatz adulthood. After passing a razor over his face in mimetic anticipation of the adult he will become, he applies aftershave and delivers the film's canonical *Scream* citation. The scene is treated as comedy, and the audience is urged to forge an empathic identification with the protagonist as he struggles to learn the ropes.

At the end of his first day in the new adult role, however, Kevin has already begun regretting his wish. Sitting on his parents' bed and looking at a family photo, he insists that he "didn't mean it." At this point, the film resolves the problem by changing the substance of the dream. In the end (and following his slapstick struggle with blundering adversity), Kevin manages to have it both ways—first by wishing his family away and then by wishing them back. In the interim, he gets to grow by confronting the reality his dream called into being. Transformed by his adventure, he opts in the end to keep the details to himself. At its core, *Home Alone* is an extreme example of wish fulfillment. The autonomy won through the struggle to transcend childhood innocence is secured even as childhood itself is reaffirmed.

When considered in constellation, *The Scream's* echo in *Home Alone* makes us witness to an unsettling transubstantiation. In less than a century, tragedy returns to the world stage as farce. But while the latter state may seem more agreeable from an affective standpoint, the repetition should not be mistaken for resolution. Because we did not know how to overcome the problems to which Munch alerted us (because our anti-capitalism remained reactionary and Romantic), we made a joke of them instead. What remains most striking about Culkin's *Scream* citation, then, is not so much that the same image—the same situational iconography—can signify two distinct and diametrically opposed contents (as might be presumed by those inclined to grant analytic primacy to the signifier), but that the content, the signified, the course of the depicted drama itself, remains ostensibly *the same*. Only our affective relationship to it has changed.

The transposition from existential terror to sympathetic laughter (the displacement of affect from Munch's homunculus to Macaulay Culkin's Kevin) speaks strongly of resignation. If laughter, as psychoanalysis suggests, is a means of diffusing tension without resolving it, then Culkin's oblique citation is unquestionably political in its implications, if not in its intent. According to Fredric Jameson, the feeling of vertigo brought on by the modern era (the very feeling that led Munch to both hear and see his *Scream*) reappears under late-capitalism as "euphoria."<sup>77</sup> How, then, might we come to terms with the perpetual alienation to which Munch alerted us if vertiginous euphoria has itself become a desperate and compensatory source of pleasure?

Instead of resolving historical tensions, the bourgeoisie fetishistically displaces them. Instead of realizing the desires it stimulates, it binds them to the commodity form. Munch

never stood a chance. And try as we might, we can't laugh it off forever. In the end (and as Benjamin proposed in a different but parallel context), Culkin's *Scream* can only be contemplated with horror.<sup>78</sup> It alerts us not solely to the estrangement of our social reality, which is indistinguishable from Munch's except when it is worse, but also to the cowardice of our comedic displacements—the dangers of the succor we glean from wish fulfillment.

## X

Following Benjamin (though its shortcomings are my own), this constellation was produced quite by chance. Prompted by a casual observation regarding Culkin's citation "without quotation marks,"<sup>79</sup> I became curious about the social and economic realities to which these images gave expression. On this basis, it became possible to document the historical interconnections between their discrete moments, and to see how—through the constellation itself—the past might bring the present into a critical state. The textual evidence I marshaled to substantiate the connection was selected on a predominantly intuitive basis. As Benjamin proposed, I allowed these material fragments to come into their own by making use of them.



By outlining the methodological coherence of Benjamin's work while operationalizing his premises to consider an illuminating case study, I hope to have shown how contemporary scholars might further the project that Benjamin began but could not complete. Munch's *Scream* became distorted through the course of its historical development. But these corruptions (these moments in the medium, these traces of the image's multi-faceted reflection) prove to be illuminating in their own right. By constellating this material, and by substituting a political for a historical view of the past,<sup>80</sup> we come face to face with decision.

Operationalizing Benjamin in this way reveals his work to be less enigmatic, more comprehensible, and of greater immediate use than the voluminous secondary literature seems to suggest. This outcome should be of interest to scholars who recognize that, both as a discipline and a vocation, cultural studies might amount to more than a means of interpreting the world. By acknowledging the desire for absolution underlying human history while alerting us to the limits inherent in the forms through which this striving has thus far found expression, Benjamin's method leads inexorably toward political reckoning.

More than anything, Benjamin demonstrates how artifacts, when brought into constellation, can become the basis for a history of capitalism that is at the same time an archaeology of desire, a phylogenetic tale recounting the struggle for freedom that ends with decision in the time of the "now." It is from here that we too must begin.

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## Notes

1. Angela McRobbie. "The *Passagenwerk* and the place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art," *Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (1992): 147–169. 
2. It is important to note, however, that—despite this ubiquity—there have thus far been virtually no engagements with Benjamin in the pages of *Lateral*. 

3. This approach to heading off the impossible future telegraphed by our present is the thread uniting the investigations included in my *Premonitions: Selected Essays on the Culture of Revolt* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018). [↗](#)
4. There is a tendency in the social sciences to conceive of “operationalization” as a means of clarifying the meaning of a concept or devising a more concrete understanding of the phenomenon to which it refers by finding its expression in a more observable phenomenon with which it might be correlated. In opposition to this tendency, and following Benjamin’s insight that fragments of material culture only come into their own (i.e. only become comprehensible) by “making use of them,” I conceive of operationalization as a form of deliberate engagement uniting ideas and action. At its threshold, Benjamin’s injunction to force the fragments of material culture into constellation so that they might reveal their synecdochical status must be applied to the fragments of Benjamin’s work as well. Only in this way do the implications and overarching coherence of this work become evident. This process is best achieved through the course of purposeful, active investigation. [↗](#)
5. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 15. [↗](#)
6. In Convolute N of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin highlighted the “necessity of paying heed over many years to every casual citation, every fleeting mention of a book.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 470 [↗](#)
7. Zsuzsi Gartner, *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2011), 43. [↗](#)
8. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” translated by Edmund Jephcott in *Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 225 [↗](#)
9. Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” translated by Edmund Jephcott in *Reflections*, 61. [↗](#)
10. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 460. [↗](#)
11. In making this argument, I am not suggesting that Benjamin somehow knew at the beginning of his intellectual career what themes and approaches he would be using at its close. I acknowledge a clear periodization in Benjamin’s intellectual biography. Nevertheless, it is important to note that reducing such a periodization to a story of biographical influences is at odds with Benjamin’s own approach to historical reckoning. Consider, for instance, how, in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” he proposed that each epoch “bears its end in itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already saw—with ruse.” It is my contention that, in order to be consistent, this insight must be applied to any periodization of Benjamin’s intellectual output as well. “Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” translated by Edmund Jephcott in *Reflections*, 162. [↗](#)
12. Theodor Adorno, “Theodor Adorno Letters to Walter Benjamin,” *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism* (New York: Verso, 2002), 129. [↗](#)
13. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” translated by Edmund Jephcott in *Reflections*, 182 [↗](#)
14. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 2014), 7. [↗](#)
15. Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 4. [↗](#)
16. Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 7. [↗](#)
17. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463 [↗](#)
18. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 456. [↗](#)
19. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 458. [↗](#)
20. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 459. [↗](#)
21. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460. [↗](#)

22. Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," translated by David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2004), 159. [↗](#)
23. Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism," 158. [↗](#)
24. Walter Benjamin, "The Life of Students," translated by Rodney Livingstone in *Selected Writings*, 37. [↗](#)
25. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," translated by Harry Zohn in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263. [↗](#)
26. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 254. [↗](#)
27. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 264. [↗](#)
28. Theodor Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's Schriften" in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 5. [↗](#)
29. Adorno, "Theodor Adorno Letters to Walter Benjamin," *Aesthetics and Politics*, 111. [↗](#)
30. Adorno, "Theodor Adorno Letters to Walter Benjamin," *Aesthetics and Politics*, 130. [↗](#)
31. Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 197. [↗](#)
32. Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in *On Walter Benjamin*, 54. [↗](#)
33. Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 207. [↗](#)
34. Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 206–207. [↗](#)
35. Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, 22. [↗](#)
36. Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," 82. [↗](#)
37. For example, Scholem argued that, for Benjamin, "paradise is at once that origin and the primal past of man as well as the utopian image of the future of his redemption—a conception of the historical process that is really cyclical rather than dialectical." Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," 83. [↗](#)
38. J. V. Stalin, "Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U. (B.)," Marxists Internet Archive, online version published 2000, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/aug/27.htm>. [↗](#)
39. Scholars frequently describe Benjamin's Marxism by referring to the influential role played by Bertolt Brecht and other figures in his intellectual biography. I do not dispute the value of such an approach; however, focusing on it exclusively prevents us from appreciating the intrinsic coherence of Benjamin's intellectual development, which embraced Marxism only to further actualize it through the synthetic dynamics of reflection. [↗](#)
40. Georg Lukács provides the classic account of both this problem and the means of its possible resolution in "What is Orthodox Marxism?" *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988). [↗](#)
41. Karl Marx, "Letter from Marx to Engels In Manchester," Marxists Internet Archive, accessed November 21, 2020, [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68\\_03\\_25-abs.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_03_25-abs.htm). [↗](#)
42. Indeed, Marx's observations regarding the bourgeois revolution's debts to "Rome reincarnate" are quintessentially Benjaminian. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Selected Works, Volume I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973). [↗](#)
43. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Verso, 2006 {1962}). [↗](#)
44. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954). [↗](#)

45. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, 157. [↗](#)
46. Benjamin, "Paris," 162. [↗](#)
47. Benjamin, "Paris," 148. [↗](#)
48. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 148. [↗](#)
49. Although the term does not appear in the latter work, the concept finds expression through cognates like "monad" and "true image of the past." In line with Michael Löwy's reading of the "Theses," I take these terms to be synonymous. As Löwy recounts, "in a first version of {Thesis XVII} to be found in the Arcades Project, in place of the concept of the monad there appears that of the 'dialectical image.'" Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (New York: Verso, 2005), 132. [↗](#)
50. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462. [↗](#)
51. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 146. [↗](#)
52. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 263. [↗](#)
53. Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," translated by Edmund Jephcott in *Reflections*, 191 [↗](#)
54. Benjamin, "Surrealism," 192. [↗](#)
55. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 146. [↗](#)
56. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 146. [↗](#)
57. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255. [↗](#)
58. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460. [↗](#)
59. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 475. [↗](#)
60. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 220. [↗](#)
61. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 206. [↗](#)
62. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 261. [↗](#)
63. As Benjamin outlined in his notes for the arcades project, "it is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life." Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460. [↗](#)
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65. Edvard Munch, "We Are Flames Which Pour Out of the Earth," in *The Private Journals of Edvard Munch: We Are Flames Which Pour Out of the Earth*, ed. and trans. J. Gill Holland (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 64–65. [↗](#)
66. Munch, *The Private Journals*, 2. [↗](#)
67. Munch, *The Private Journals*, 42. [↗](#)
68. Munch, *The Private Journals*, 144. [↗](#)
69. Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 152. [↗](#)
70. Munch, *The Private Journals*, 176. [↗](#)

71. Tina Yarborough, "The Strange Case of Postmodernism's Appropriation of Edvard Munch," in *Edvard Munch: An Anthology*, ed. Erik Mørstad (Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, 2006), 191, 193. [↗](#)
  72. Yarborough, "The Strange Case of Postmodernism's Appropriation," 192–193. [↗](#)
  73. Yarborough, "The Strange Case of Postmodernism's Appropriation," 192. [↗](#)
  74. Yarborough, "The Strange Case of Postmodernism's Appropriation," 199. [↗](#)
  75. Yarborough, "The Strange Case of Postmodernism's Appropriation," 199. [↗](#)
  76. Gleiberman, Owen. "Home Alone" ew.com. <https://ew.com/article/2007/07/25/home-alone-2/>. [↗](#)
  77. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 28. [↗](#)
  78. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256. [↗](#)
  79. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 458. [↗](#)
  80. Benjamin, "Surrealism," 182. [↗](#)
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## Border Trash: Recovering the Waste of US-Mexico Border Policy in *Fatal Migrations* and 2666

by Alyssa Quintanilla | Articles, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** This article examines how discourses of waste and wastefulness are applied to the bodies of border crossers and border dwellers along the US-Mexico border. Using Josh Begley's 2016 digital memorial "Fatal Migrations" alongside the fourth section of Roberto Bolaño's 2666, I examine how the matter of bodies plays an essential role in border policing. Forced into isolated and environmentally hostile areas, migrants are only visible through discarded objects, left behind during border crossing. As a result, American policy and discourse is able to associate migrant bodies with the trash they leave behind—effectively reducing migrant bodies to disgusting and ecologically dangerous. I look at "Fatal Migrations" to consider how the landscape is deployed against migrants and the vibrancy of their bodies after death. This reading leads to a consideration of waste across the border as seen in the fourth section of Roberto Bolaño's 2666, "The Part about the Crimes." A fictionalized representation of the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, Bolaño's narrative shows the reduction of women's bodies to capitalistic waste. Taken together the two pieces illustrate the dismissal of bodies to waste and wasteful under overlapping immigration and economic policies. Moreover, both pieces show how death in the borderlands is central to American understandings of sovereignty. The result is increasingly militarized environments and solidified borders in the form of physical structures, cultural attitudes, and policy.

**KEYWORDS** bodies, border, Mexico, migration, policy, United States, US-Mexico Border, waste

On the wall of the Grupo Beta office in Sásabe, a small Mexican border town, is a "map . . . dotted with crosses, one for each body that had been found since the office had been opened. There were dozens upon dozens."<sup>1</sup> The map of the Sonoran Desert that comprises the borderlands between Northern Mexico and Southern Arizona is a warning to potential border crossers about the high risk of death in the area. It emphasizes the hostility not merely of the desert, but the American government's policies and general attitudes toward migrants entering (either legally or illegally) the United States.

Since the 2016 presidential election, promises for a border wall have been central to the American right's agenda, asserting the urgent need to secure the nation's southern border. The continued promise for a wall illustrates an American fixation on protection that disregards the environment and stresses a continued aversion to the bodies of border crossers. Moreover, the Trump administration's renewed attention toward the southern border ignores the work that has already been done to fortify the border in the form of walls, vehicle barriers, surveillance towers, and the movement of people away from populated areas.<sup>2</sup> Crossing the border reduces migrants to waste and wasteful as their journey and experience is only visible and understood through the items that remain.

Using examples from literature and digital art, I examine how the matter of bodies in the borderlands illuminates not only the environment, but the material consequences of policy and rising structures. This article looks at the political and cultural flattening of certain bodies in the United States' southern borderlands. This flattening is the abstraction of humanity at the center of migrant movement and the reduction of bodies down to what is left behind—effectively erasing the lives, deaths, and stories that led to their position in the first place. By refusing to acknowledge the lived realities of migrants and border dwellers, the region becomes a site of disgust leading to increasingly dangerous immigration policy and more imposing structures as a means of performance rather than protection. I look at Josh Begley's 2016 digital art piece *Fatal Migrations* and Roberto Bolaño's 2004 novel *2666*, and I utilize concepts of "waste" and the "environmental other" as defined by Sarah Jaquette Ray, in order to explore how bodies in the borderlands are reduced to political and environmental waste. Taken together these pieces push against the displacement of waste on to certain bodies and work to recenter the narratives of loss that are often erased in favor of increasingly fortified borders.

Begley's and Bolaño's works disrupt anti-immigration rhetoric and policy that reduce the borderlands into a monolithic site of danger aimed at the United States. Both artists are concerned with the material reality of the space and the consequences attached to the matter of bodies. Their overlapping interests do not end at the politics of the border but extend to the treatment of bodies in all of their forms (living and dead). Death and its connection to waste are central in both pieces as the artists seek to recover the experiences of those lost in the desert borderlands, either to physical or political violence. *Fatal Migrations* showcases the places where bodies were recovered in the desert, while *2666* examines how they came to be found in the first place. Importantly, Begley is working from real data collected by the Pima County Coroner's office, while Bolaño was inspired by events in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico to craft a fictional narrative about the feminicides. Begley is connected with the human element of death, while Bolaño's approach is much more directed to address the dismissal of hundreds of bodies as literal waste. The works contrast in their approaches but ultimately align to show the continuation of border discourse that encompasses not only the political situation but also the environmental response. Further, their emphasis on recovery at the center of both pieces highlights the multifaceted violences perpetuated by the creation and continuation of the border construct including the environment, politics, and capital.

Despite their differing forms and emphasis on different spaces along the border, both pieces add to the contemporary discussion about increasingly militarized borders and larger barriers. Begley and Bolaño both examine how certain bodies are imbued with social and political meaning and how that meaning is then transferred to the physical space. While both projects work to evoke outrage and empathy for migrants and border dwellers experiencing racial and economic exclusion, they are acknowledging a contradictory discourse that relies upon ideas of disgust and hate. The push for larger structures is propelled by a willful misunderstanding of the border and the borderland's environment, as well as a refusal to humanize migrants. Begley's work, published in 2016, is a direct response to the presidential rhetoric about the border and assertions about the wall. Bolaño's entrance into the discourses about the militarization of the border is more oblique, but directly addresses exploitation in the borderlands and the desert environment. Focusing on the physical environment, both artists highlight its importance not merely as an extensive bioregion, but its weaponization in the name of American sovereignty and place in policy. Through their examinations of death and the materiality of bodies in the

desert, both artists grapple with the American political discourse that demands larger structures, both literally and in the form of policy, separating the two countries.

In this article, I examine how bodies in borderlands are treated like waste, specifically focusing on the transition between migrant and illegal immigrant, life and death, use and waste. In both *Fatal Migrations* and *2666* the environment is a "tool of boundary enforcement *and* a strategic layer for border crossers."<sup>3</sup> The environment of southern Arizona, on which Begley focuses, and Bolaño's fictionalized representation of the Chihuahua desert, vary in regard to flora and fauna, but present similar desert-related obstacles. The spaces are hot, dry, and seemingly hostile to those who live in and move through them. I begin by examining the discourse that surrounds ecological waste in the border region and how it is purposefully and insidiously extended to bodies. This leads to a brief discussion of the vibrancy of bodies (both living and dead) via new materialist thought to suggest the interconnectedness of all things as a way of understanding the matter of body in all its forms. I extend this discussion to consider how disgust has manifested itself within the American political imagination as a means of justifying increasingly militarized and fortified borders. I use both Begley and Bolaño's approach to the border, desert, bodies, and waste as a way of understanding the lasting consequences of placing disgust on to migrant bodies. Furthermore, if the body is figured as literal waste, the consequence of larger barriers is to not only keep out a dangerous and ecologically dangerous other, but to erase their bodies and movement entirely.

## Environmental Waste

All along the border in southern Arizona are posters that warn migrants about the dangers of entering the United States through the desert. Posters by the non-profit migrant aid group Humane Borders read "*No Hay Suficiente Agua! No Vale La Pena!*" (There's not enough water! It's not worth it!). The posters warn border crossers about the risks of moving into the desert, but also position the land as isolated and treacherous. The natural world is more than just a form of passage for border crossers; it is also a policing tool that allows the US government to evade responsibility for the amount of deaths happening on US soil every year.<sup>4</sup> As Jason de León writes in *The Land of Open Graves*, "The Border Patrol disguises the impact of its current enforcement policy by mobilizing a combination of sterilized discourse, redirected blame, and 'natural' environmental processes that erase evidence of what happens in the most remote parts of southern Arizona."<sup>5</sup> The environment then becomes a protected and policed space that relies on the exclusion of certain "disgusting bodies."<sup>6</sup>

The reduction of bodies to waste is part of the American colonial legacies that reduced colonized bodies to dirty, disgusting, and wasteful as a means of control. American bodies were figured as "closed" and "ascetic" while the colonized bodies were "open" and "grotesque."<sup>7</sup> This diminishment is often linked to hygienic practices and used to dismiss the humanity of colonized subjects.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the body of the "other" is not only disgusting, but dangerous to the environment and American health. This understanding of dangerous and disgusting bodies is especially salient where America is confronted with a racialized other. Border crossers and dwellers are vilified for wasteful and "leaky" bodies that are only visible through the waste left behind. The "corporeal presence of undocumented immigrants in border-protected areas is repeatedly associated with defiling and contaminating nature."<sup>9</sup> The movement of people through the border is only visible

through that which is discarded, and American colonial logic relies on dismissal of non-Western bodies on the grounds of uncleanness. Moreover, the focus on the corporeal body of border crossers is grounds for exclusion as the "interest in bodily leakages derives from their role in Western conceptualizations of subject formation"; they are "requirements of civility, rationality, and therefore inclusion in the body politic."<sup>10</sup> This understanding of the body of "others" makes them a continuous threat to the natural world, but also the American body politic.

Unclean bodies propel border discourse through the multiple threats they represent to the environment, national security, and ideas of disgust. As Sarah Jaquette Ray posits in *The Environmental Other*, "disgust shapes mainstream environmental discourse . . . by describing which kinds of bodies and bodily relations to the environment are ecologically 'good' as well as which kinds of bodies are ecologically 'other.'"<sup>11</sup> For Ray, environmental disgust is inextricably linked to the movement of bodies through particular environments and the ways bodies both take in and push against their surroundings. Those who pose a threat to the environment, through various toxicities, are "measured at the level of the body."<sup>12</sup> This approach to disgust functions at the individual level, meaning that certain bodies are rendered disgusting, while toxicity is the product of disgust on a larger scale. Disgust through the form of trash, in the case of the migrant, is reflected back onto the bodies that move through the nature of the border region.

The use of nature preserves and national parks along the US-Mexico borderlands stresses the importance of a clean and waste-free wilderness. Importantly, "the protection of the land came at the cost of stripping indigenous and Mexican-American people from their rights to land."<sup>13</sup> The presentation of a clean environment along the border gestures to the US colonial legacy and the continued oppression and violence of the border region. Not only do these measures present an environment worthy of preservation, it emphasizes the place of the environment in immigration policy. Ideas of disgust and environmental protection are mobilized in the creation of governmental policy to invoke "anti-immigration not just as a national security imperative, but an ecological one. That is, immigrants are trespassing protected ecosystems and wildernesses, not just national boundaries."<sup>14</sup> By pairing matters of national security to the environment, US governmental policy has the power to utilize disgust against a racialized other as more than just an immigrant, but also a threat the health and purity of nation. Essentially, the state of "nature" along the border renders those sites "productive sites for delimiting and naturalizing the national body."<sup>15</sup> Movement into the nation is elevated to a national security threat that compromises the entire system—environmental, political, and affective.

By militarizing and weaponizing the borderlands environment, the US government relies heavily on environmental discourse to maintain national purity in its many forms. Parks and protected landscapes like Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, and Big Bend National Park all line the border adding an additional layer of criminality as migrants move through these landscapes. These parks are used to challenge the extent of sovereignty and create "a no man's land where sheer physical survival is a feat and often a miracle, a place where rule of law is momentarily suspended, where the fate of those who wander is left to the natural elements and the harsh terrain."<sup>16</sup> The maintenance of parks along the border shows the US government's reliance upon both sovereignty and environmental discourse to erase and criminalize migrants. These parks are an essential part of border policing by pushing migrants into isolated and dangerous landscapes, vilifying their movement through claims of illegal park entry, and criminalizing any waste they leave behind. Blame is placed on those who "move through the desert

wilderness" as "immigrants are presumed not to care about protecting it."<sup>17</sup> In using the park as a form of passage, migrants are thought to move carelessly, leaving behind objects no longer necessary for their journey and trampling indigenous flora. Public discourse has long vilified migrant movement as environmentally dangerous as a 2003 article from *Tucson Citizen* states that "more trashed sites are likely until illegal immigrants stop coming over the border or start cleaning up after themselves."<sup>18</sup> This aversion to illegitimate objects is read on to every aspect of the migrant experience, including the placement of water by migrant aid groups. A leaked video in January of 2018 showed Border Patrol agents destroying water jugs saying, "picking up the trash that somebody left on the trail."<sup>19</sup> Migrant movement is typically only visible through the objects they leave behind, making their journeys through preserved environments environmentally dangerous not only to a pristine wilderness, but the country.<sup>20</sup> Migrants are seen to move carelessly, and any waste in the form of food wrappers, water jugs, and even campfires are reduced to an ecological threat. Ultimately, the remains of migrant journeys are used to rationalized disgust aimed at migrant bodies, as "trash makes visible the invisible movement of people through the borderland."<sup>21</sup> While the bodies of the migrants have moved through the environment, the supplies necessary for that movement are left behind as waste and as reminders of not only those who have moved but also the toxicity their bodies represent.

Used bottles of water and backpacks indicate the movement of people through Southern Arizona. Source: David Whitmer, 2020.

Ray's examination of disgust in the borderlands gestures to the contemporary environmental discourse in the region as intertwined with the politics of migration and American sovereignty. While I take the importance of her contribution, it does not confront

the reality that the waste in the desert borderlands is not limited to materials but includes the very bodies associated with the region. The body's association with waste and toxicity continues even after death, figuring the migrant body as a persistent ecological hazard. Already reduced to the trash they leave behind, migrants' bodies are associated with waste even after death—figuring them as environmental hazards. Certain bodies have access to the desert environment and protected landscapes. More specifically, white bodies are allowed to hike and move through protected landscapes, but racialized migrants are called into question.<sup>22</sup> The presence and persistence of border patrol in the region is also exempt from environmental scrutiny as they exist to fortify the border; any waste they produce or damage they do is a natural consequence of security.<sup>23</sup> However, this privileging does not address the body as waste (regardless of the body—white or racialized—it begins to decay). This absence calls into question not only how we understand bodies decaying in the desert but also whose bodies are visible and recoverable.

In representing the border, Josh Begley's *Fatal Migrations* offers "Some of The Places People Died While Trying to Cross the Border."<sup>24</sup> The piece, comprised of 2,600 circles, is the "interactive visualization . . . [of] the known location of someone's death."<sup>25</sup> The piece centers on land on the Arizona side of the US-Mexico border where migrants die crossing the desert every single year.<sup>26</sup> In pushing against the flattening discourses of the border region, Begley's focus on migrant death intervenes in the use of the border region as a monolithic political talking point. The emphasis on the environment through visual images gestures to the complexity of the region that is both environmental and political. Begley's interactive piece calls forth the multiple intersections of ecology, affect, and the materiality both of the desert and the bodies left behind.

Source: *Fatal Migrations* by Josh Begley. Screenshot from author.

In working through these intersections, Begley leaves out the bodies of border crossers, stressing the erasure of their experiences alongside their material body. Begley shows the places where migrants have died without relying on gruesome images that depict death, but rather focusing on how the environment and political rhetoric work in tandem to

remove the reality of people in the region. Begley highlights the importance of each individual body found in the desert by providing each person with a bubble that shows an image of where their bodies were recovered from google maps. The viewer is encouraged to click on each circle which states the name of the victim at the bottom. Begley's use of interactivity implicates the user in the maintenance of the border. Each click pulls up a different place, though the desert blurs together quickly as the user scrolls over the circles. The display emphasizes the vastness of the desert and the very real danger it presents for those who might get lost or merely do not have sufficient supplies to cross. Begley foregrounds the danger most migrants face when they enter the space between the United States and Mexico, which is not just the border patrol and harmful, racist, rhetoric that stand in their way.

Each image works against the anonymity of many migrants by attaching a name and a date when the body was recovered. The piece is not searchable and relies on users to scroll, click, and take their time with each photograph. Even those who died in the desert without a specific location attached are represented through a black circle with white writing stating "Unknown." Conversely, several circles do not have a name, just a date and an image of where the body was found. Begley's piece is simultaneously art, catalogue, and memorial showing the vastness and urgency of migrant death in the desert. Using digital images of the land, Begley stresses that the border is a political construct placed upon the environment. The decay of bodies in the borderlands suggests the reintegration of bodies into the environment and illuminates the connectivity of all matter through all things. By omitting the bodies, Begley is showing how matter not only moves through environmental systems, but within discourse. As Jane Bennett suggests in *Vibrant Matter*, all matter has the ability to act and act upon the world that surrounds it regardless of perceived liveliness. She suggests that we must examine a "vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due."<sup>27</sup> Bennett's contentions about recognizing the potential of matter emphasizes that the "status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated."<sup>28</sup> Giving "things" their due means recognizing their force beyond the binaries of alive and dead to see the possibilities in all things and the interconnection of everything. This does not mean the reduction of bodies to things, but rather a way of recognizing all things to account for the responsibility we hold for our entwined position. Christina Holmes writes about a "web of relations" that accounts for "other humans and the more-than-human world" as a way of recognizing the continuous influence that matter (all matter) is both impacted and impacting the world.<sup>29</sup> Understanding bodies, both living and dead, as persistent and vibrant matters places it directly within a larger web of relations that allows for those bodies to be memorialized, mourned, and remembered. As such, the bodies that are both missing and represented within *Fatal Migrations* are continuous and have a lively persistence that demands recognition and continuously interacts with the human and non-human worlds. Moreover, accounting for the vibrancy of all bodies demands recognition for how they are part of discourses about the borderlands and why they are continuously dismissed alongside the trash that makes migrant movement visible. Accounting for the matter of bodies in *Fatal Migrations* shows how they are vibrant in their absence, suggesting the importance of all migrants within larger political, economic, and cultural systems.

Close-up of "Fatal Migrations" example. Source: Fatal Migrations by Josh Begley. Screenshot from author.

A live body is more than just matter, but as Begley suggests, the harshness of the desert is relentless on all matter regardless of motivation. The images Begley uses do not show the physical walls or fences that have long delineated the border but stresses the sprawling desert as an essential piece of bordering. The absence of the border fence suggests that American immigration policies such as Prevention through Deterrence (1944) are just as successful in erasing the realities of migration.<sup>30</sup> The danger is more persistent to migrants than a looming but scalable wall. By understanding the border region as a complex ecosystem of hostile environment and political barriers, Begley is calling attention to the materiality of the bodies left behind in the region. Isolated areas along southern Arizona are absent of structures, people, or aid, making the desert a hostile tool that reduces the migrant experience into nothingness. All that remains, as Begley suggests through each picture, is the vibrancy of the bodies. Or understood more broadly, the acknowledgment that someone died in that area, and in doing so, shifted the space. Every body tells an important story worth reclaiming. Begley's *Fatal Migrations* works to recover these narratives by illustrating that those lost in the desert borderlands have continued to impact the world that surrounds them, through their bodily reintroduction to the environment and their ability to produce an emotional response. The bodily waste of border crossers is vibrant as it continuously acts on the world, including through the computer screen, regardless of conventional ideas of liveliness. This vibrancy carries through the bodies' reintroduction to the environment, and more importantly in Begley's project, into the way the American public views dead bodies in the borderlands. Caught in a continuous web of relations, the people represented in *Fatal Migrations* exhibit vibrancy as the effect they have does not end with their deaths at the hand of inhumane border policy but becomes part of larger discourses about the border. Read alongside Ray, Begley's project stresses the need for attention in the borderlands, while working to highlight the importance of bodies that are dismissed in the name of sovereignty. The difficult choice to cross the border is reduced to the spread of non-American waste.

Begley's work not only re-centers migrant narratives as ecological and political but also stresses the unnatural nature of a political divide more broadly. As Jessica Autcher writes

in "Border Monuments: Memory, Counter-Memory, and (b)Ordering Practices along the US-Mexico Border", the construction of the border is an attempt to solidify nationhood and sovereignty. The border is an intentional disruption meant to partition the United States from Mexico and the environment from its natural state. Autcher writes, "Before the fence, there is just desert, brush, and land. After the fence there are citizens, ownership, geography, territory, governance, and enforcement."<sup>31</sup> Autcher, like Begley, emphasizes how the artifice of the border has led to large numbers of deaths at the hands of the state. *Fatal Migrations* highlights this by showing the land in individual circles and creating a dizzying effect of not knowing where the bodies were recovered. The "borderlands" encompasses a large area, nearly 2,000 miles, but by focusing on desert that looks nearly identical in every image, Begley is highlighting how a line in the sand costs thousands of lives. By scrolling through the piece, the viewer experiences visual markers acknowledging how migrants easily get lost and how fragile life is in a hostile environment. The absent bodies in Begley's piece allow for a reimagining of the missing narrative that led to the migrants' deaths. Waste is tangential to Begley's art, but his focus on the migrant body brings it to the forefront when examining the borderlands—a site of death for thousands of migrants. Begley's focus on death in the borderlands allows us to understand how waste and wastefulness are placed upon bodies that move across the border. His emphasis on the environment demonstrates how all bodies are caught in a web of relations that includes and interacts with the non-human world. Each image is both a tribute to the person lost and a reminder of the body's reduction to waste in a natural space made unnatural by a political boundary.

## "The Inertia of the Festering Place Itself"

Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, a novel in five parts, culminates in Santa Teresa, Mexico, a fictional city along the United States-Mexico border. While the plots of each part differ, the one common thread throughout each narrative is the murders of thousands of women in Santa Teresa. A passing detail in the background of the first stories, becomes central by the fourth part, "The Part About the Crimes." Beginning in 1993 and concluding in 1997, Bolaño's approach to the murders mimics the real-life discourse that surrounded the feminicides in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico during the same time. The murders, both central to the plot and pushed repeatedly into the background, show how a lack of urgency amounts to an unacknowledged crisis. "The Part about the Crimes" blurs the lines of fiction and reality by extrapolating upon real events through made-up names, circumstances, and characters. By creating Santa Teresa, Mexico as a stand-in for Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Bolaño layers the facts from the murders with a larger story, creating a mix of "what he knew and what he imagined."<sup>32</sup> The result is a haunting narrative of violence where the victims never speak but are constantly present. *2666* is both focused on reclaiming the voices of hundreds of women who were needlessly killed in the borderlands and recognizing the systems that silenced their deaths in the first place. "The Part About the Crimes" has several different characters who move in and out of their interactions with the murders, both acknowledging and ignoring their scale and urgency. While it is a bound section, it reads as a series of interconnected vignettes that tell the story of continued violence from the authorities, corporations, politicians, and the community. Bolaño starts many of the sections with the name of the victim (if possible) and the circumstances in which her body was discovered. Throughout "The Part About the Crimes" Bolaño centers not on border politics, but loss of lives in the border region. Bolaño makes it clear that the murders are the consequences of the intersections of the border, capitalism, and the

environment. Despite not directly addressing the political rhetoric of the militarization of the border, Bolaño engages with the politics of the borderlands specifically through death.

In attempting to reclaim the voices of victims, Bolaño begins "The Part About the Crimes" in a vacant lot. The body was found "in Colonia Las Flores. She was dressed in white long-sleeved T-shirt and a yellow knee-length skirt, a size too big. Some children playing in the lot found her and told their parents."<sup>33</sup> This discovery establishes the narratives that follow as part of a chronology of the murders. The girl is identified as, "Esperanza Gómez Saldaña", and her death is cursorily investigated before her body is "put . . . away in a freezer" without further investigation.<sup>34</sup> Her murder remains unsolved, marking the beginning of the feminicides Bolaño discusses throughout the section. Esperanza Gómez Saldaña

heads the list. Although surely there were other girls and women who died in 1992. Other girls and women who didn't make it onto the list or were never found, who were buried in unmarked graves in the desert and whose ashes were scattered in the middle of the night, when not even the person scattering them knew where he was.<sup>35</sup>

By beginning the narrative with an arbitrary indication, Bolaño acknowledges the murders as the consequence of historical violence and border politics. Few murders are solved throughout the narrative. Most of the cases are closed without resolution or merely forgotten in pursuit of other crimes.

Esperanza Gómez Saldaña's body is carelessly discarded in a vacant lot, reducing it to waste. Esperanza's is the first body found in 1993, but she is not the last to be found in a vacant lot. Throughout the narrative, bodies are found in desolate areas or directly alongside garbage to show their lack of worth in Mexican society. The murdered bodies are almost exclusively women, highlighting the disposability of femininity. The bodies of women are found in dumps, along roads, and often in view of maquiladoras. In May, "a dead woman was found in a dump between Colonia Las Flores and the General Sepúlveda industrial park. In the complex stood the buildings of four maquiladoras where household appliances were assembled."<sup>36</sup> While not all of the women fit a particular profile, as Bolaño is sure to point out, the majority of the victims have some association with the subassembly plants that line the border. The maquiladora system is comprised of largely foreign- and US-owned companies that have played a pivotal role in the creation and continuation of poverty along the border.<sup>37</sup> Bolaño's narrative does not focus explicitly on the maquiladora system, but its presence in the majority of the murder cases points the connection between foreign capital, domestic exploitation, and death. Often, women went missing after their shifts at the maquiladora as "the area around the maquiladora was deserted and dangerous, best crossed in a car and not by bus and then on foot since the factory was at least a mile from the nearest bus stop"<sup>38</sup> The conditions for reaching the maquiladora daily may be dangerous, but they provide steady work to thousands of women who pour into border cities yearly.<sup>39</sup>

The maquiladora system is crucial in perpetuating ideas of the borderlands as unclean and toxic. Environmental arguments about the implementation of NAFTA focused not on the damage large subassembly plants would have the local environment but on the bodies of workers turned migrants. The logic followed that in attracting more people to the border, more people would take the steps to cross into the United States, and those bodies are "the real source of pollution."<sup>40</sup> Workers are understood through their association to the

plants and "border pollution does not stay put."<sup>41</sup> The environmental focus on NAFTA shows "traditional American stereotyping of Mexicans as dirty, unhygienic, and self-soiling; it also made the prospects of uncontrolled immigration seem both naturally inevitable and consequently more threatening."<sup>42</sup> By placing bodies in the view of maquiladoras, the border, and in dumps, Bolaño is gesturing to the reduction of some bodies to waste through political and economic structures. The matter of the body cannot exist outside of these structures, but rather is understood and flattened through them.

Throughout "The Part about the Crimes" Bolaño stresses the refusal to acknowledge bodies and the murder cases. As characters interact with the various cases, other deaths occur completely in the background. Police officers stand around joking and laughing as, "A man dressed in white, but wearing jeans, pushed a stretcher. On the stretcher, covered in a gray plastic sheet, lay the body of Emilia Mena Mena. Nobody noticed."<sup>43</sup> The narrative focus on the man's jeans and the policeman's laughter show how the death of another woman is so commonplace it fades into the background. Bolaño explains the death of Emilia Mena Mena in the next section. She was found in a dump that "didn't have a formal name, because it wasn't supposed to be there, but it had an informal name: it was called El Chile."<sup>44</sup> Created in the desert that surrounds the city and on the outskirts of the maquiladora plants, El Chile becomes a center for disgust. The dump's reoccurrence in the narrative aligns with the deaths of hundreds of women. As more waste accumulates, more women die. By placing the bodies in an unplanned dump, Bolaño is suggesting the equation of the materiality of bodies to the materiality of literal waste. Given the proximity of the border and the maquiladoras, the waste associated with bodies is highlighted through the dump's appearance and seeming persistence throughout the novel. The authorities do little to prevent the accumulation of waste in the form of garbage and bodies. In many ways, the bodies recovered there have never been treated as more than the waste that surrounds them. Like Ray's assertions about the transference of waste left behind in the desert, the bodies placement amongst garbage sends the same message. The result is what Zygmunt Bauman articulates in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*: "'human waste' or, more correctly, wasted humans" which are "the inevitable outcome of modernization."<sup>45</sup> As Bauman suggests, the place of humans in waste is part of the uneven process of modernization and one that reduces humans to waste within a capitalist system. In Santa Teresa, El Chile sprawls as a direct result of the economic outcomes of the border—most clearly, the maquiladoras and NAFTA. The disgust generated toward El Chile and the women within is not aimed at system or even those who commit murder, but the bodies themselves.

Dumps are not the only site where bodies are recovered. Bolaño's positioning of the environment mirrors that of Begley's approach as he acknowledges the importance of the barren desert that accounts for large portions of the borderlands. One body is "found in the desert, a few yards from the highway between Santa Teresa and Villaviciosa. The body, which was in an advanced state of decomposition, was facedown . . . The killer or killers didn't bother to dig a grave. Nor did they bother to venture too far into the desert. They just dragged the body a few yards and left it there."<sup>46</sup> The natural elements (i.e. heat and animal interference) prove graves unnecessary, as the environment works to hide any incriminating evidence. The desert not only covers the crime but reintegrates the body into the larger ecosystem. Refusing to bury the body suggests a refusal of dignity for the murder victim and hatred of her humanity. After recovering the body, it was impossible to "establish the cause of death, alluding vaguely to the possibility of strangulation, but it did confirm that the body had been in the desert for at least seven days and no longer than one month."<sup>47</sup> The desert acts upon the bodies discarded there, refusing reduction to a

passive background, but rather becoming an active agent in boundary enforcement.<sup>48</sup> Like many of the other cases throughout the section, this one goes unsolved as the investigator assigned to the case is encouraged to “focus on the specific case under investigation” once realizing the identification found with the body does not match the victim.<sup>49</sup> The constant deflection of investigation throughout the novel illustrates the bureaucracy that stands in the way of solving any cases, allowing for more and more deaths. No case is solved without institutional support and access to the proper resources. While Bolaño is concerned with vilifying the systems in place that perpetuated the deaths of hundreds of women (i.e. global capitalism and insidious bureaucracy) he does not position many of the investigators as blameless characters. Rather, nearly all of his characters do nothing to question the systems that surround them or the deaths those system perpetuate.

The desert occupies a strange liminal space in 2666. It is a site of extreme violence and death, and its beauty is one of the most hypnotic aspects of the novel. In the first part of the novel, “The Part About the Critics,” Bolaño pulls back from the harshness of the space claiming, “*hostile* wasn’t the word, an environment whose language they refused to recognize, an environment that existed on some parallel plane where they couldn’t make their presence felt, imprint themselves, unless they raised their voices, unless they argued.”<sup>50</sup> Bolaño uses the idea of “xerophilia,” or the “condition of being adapted to and expressing a fondness for dry, arid places,” to explore that landscape as simultaneously beautiful and strange in its capabilities.<sup>51</sup> The desert is unrecognizable and incomprehensible to outsiders but equally impossible to overcome to natives. In the first two sections of the book, the desert landscape is kept at bay through an outsiders’ view of it as hostile and insurmountable. It looms in the background of each narrative, not just a backdrop for action, but an environment that holds secrets and resentment towards the humans that live on the land. While “The Part About the Crimes” focuses on the local murders, it also acknowledges those who attempt to migrate across the desert landscape at least twice. In attempt to solve one of the many murders, the police accused a Salvadorean migrant who spent “two weeks in the cells of Police Precinct #3.”<sup>52</sup> Once released he was a “broken man. A little later he crossed the border with a *pollero* . . . he got lost in the desert and after walking for three days, he made it to Patagonia, badly dehydrated. . . . he was picked up by the sheriff and spent the day in jail and then was sent to a hospital . . . [where] he [died] in peace”<sup>53</sup> The Salvadorean migrant’s death brings the desert that surrounds Santa Teresa closer, reminding the reader that not only is the city deadly but so too is desert that surrounds it. In this way, the citizens of Santa Teresa are caught in a precarious set of overlapping violences that insure they have nowhere to turn. Based on Chihuahua desert that surrounds Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the desert borderlands is a deadly space, environmentally, politically, and culturally. The Salvadorean migrant’s death, like those captured in *Fatal Migrants*, happens quietly and is not mourned or even acknowledged again.

El Chile and other dumping sites throughout “The Part About the Crimes” embody the political backdrop of the border region. The dumps literalize the placement of those who inhabit the liminal space of the borderlands, bringing forth disgust. The transference from garbage as waste to bodies as waste shows how disgust is placed upon those who inhabit or cross the intersection of the two countries. El Chile proves impossible to remove as “work to get rid of the illegal dump . . . was permanently halted. A reporter from *La Tribuna de Santa Teresa* who was covering the relocation or demolition of the dump said he’d never seen so much chaos in his life . . . it came from the inertia of the festering place itself.”<sup>54</sup> The dump takes on a life of its own as efforts to do anything about it are continuously thwarted, allowing officials to let the garbage stay and continue to rot. The

abandonment of removing El Chile comes approximately halfway through the narrative and shows how officials found it easier to let go any attempt at intervention in favor of the path of least resistance. The mounting of waste mirrors the bodies that accumulate throughout the narrative. More bodies are found in El Chile afterward; it remains a site of disgust and waste, allowed to grow through a continuous refusal to actually find the source of the problem. Bolaño's equation of the murders to the dump is essential in demanding recognition for the women who have been discarded there, pushing against the reduction of bodies to waste.

The final murder in the section ends on a note of resignation and gestures to the continuation of femicide further into Mexico. In December 1997, the last body "wasn't found on the western edge of the city but on the eastern edge, by the dirt road that runs along the border and forks and vanishes when it reaches the first mountains and steep passes."<sup>55</sup> The woman's body is still recovered in view of the border, but rather than leading to the desert, it leads into the mountains. The move from west to east gestures to the continuation of the crisis in the rest of Mexico. There is no resolution only the spread of continued violence throughout the rest of the country. The suggestion of continued and spreading violence is juxtaposed by the celebration that masks the darkness of the streets "like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost."<sup>56</sup> The city's movement forward comes at the cost of continued death on political, social, and economic levels. More specifically, the price of progress in Santa Teresa is the deaths of hundreds of women for the success of foreign-owned companies. As the conditions in Santa Teresa remain, so too do the deaths of a vulnerable population.

## From Waste to Walls

Bolaño and Begley both point to the refusal to acknowledge the violence enacted upon marginalized bodies in the border region and the importance of recovering each person. The erasure of peoples in the region is a continuation of violence and part of a global move to solidify borders. This solidification creates, as Todd Miller writes in *Empire of Borders*, "never-ending battlespaces" that lead to continuous escalation and fortification.<sup>57</sup> The violence of the US-Mexico border is not exceptional in its creation, but the silence that surrounds the loss of life in the region allows for its continuation. Importantly, this silence is not restricted to movement across the border but extends to the maquiladora systems as a site of political, environmental, and economic strain. The result, as both Bolaño and Begley show, is mass amounts of deaths for vulnerable populations that go unnoticed on local, national, and global scales. Femicide and migrant deaths are allowed to continue simply through the refusal to acknowledge their existence. US immigration and economic policy has thrived on the silences that surround death in the borderlands, instead insisting that the problem is environmental or social. In essence, migrants are aware of the risks of entering the desert of southern Arizona just as women should know better than to walk home alone at night. Begley and Bolaño look to the bodies of border crossers and dwellers as a means of reasserting the importance of acknowledging the people who have died as a direct consequence of economic and political decisions.

By positioning the bodies that reside along or cross the border as an ecological danger, anti-immigration policy relies on discourses of purity and by extension whiteness. The nature of the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument is a pure, natural ideal, a reflection of

the rest of the nation as untainted and organized around a specific type of Americanness. When “disgusting” bodies cross borders they “threaten the pure bodies; such bodies can only be imagined as pure by the perpetual restaging of this fantasy and violation.”<sup>58</sup> American purity is born out of contrast with the surrounding nations. Importantly, this emphasis on purity furthers the “belief that the Mexican immigrant was the real source of pollution” reducing not only migrants, but border dwellers to pollution.<sup>59</sup> The movement of illicit and dirty bodies, is very literally, the “unwanted movement . . . by which the border environment became comprehensible to the American public.”<sup>60</sup> As Begley and Bolaño show, the realities of the border are only visible through the movement of bodies perceived as threatening and environmentally dangerous.

The resulting militarization of the United States’ southern border has taken a variety of forms including policy, increased surveillance, and most recently, increased attention on physical barriers.<sup>61</sup> The turn to walls and walling out people and nations calls into question not only the materiality of the wall, but the practice of walling. The wall is the move from passive, and relatively quiet, immigration policy to performative action aimed at a racialized border, its citizens, and ideas of waste. As Wendy Brown describes in her book *Walled States, Walled Sovereignty*, border walls are “not built as defense against potential attacks by other sovereigns” rather “these walls target nonstate transnational actors—individuals, groups, movements, organizations and industries.”<sup>62</sup> The rhetoric that surrounds the border wall is not so much about walling out the Mexican nation (though that is gets lumped in very easily), but preventing specific, threatening, bodies from impinging on the borders. Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency has long been aimed at people crossing the border calling Mexicans “drug dealers, criminals, rapists.”<sup>63</sup> It’s important to remember that many migrants crossing the border are not coming from Mexico, many are from Central and South America.<sup>64</sup> However, by focusing on certain bodies, anti-immigration discourses can emphasize the requirements for inclusion in the body politic. Looking at bodies as waste and wasteful excludes any leaky or unclean bodies from gaining entrance to the United States. In excluding unclean bodies, walls are about the performance and maintenance of sovereignty as it applies to citizens. The creation of walls is an extension and assertion of this sovereignty in action as “new walls function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise.”<sup>65</sup> Further, calls for a wall along the United States’ southern border are often about ideas of American safety. In a January 2020 tweet, Donald Trump tweeted, “The powerful Trump Wall is replacing porous, useless, and ineffective barriers in high traffic areas requested by Border Patrol. Illegal crossings are dropping as more and more Wall is completed! #BuildTheWall.”<sup>66</sup> The previous wall is deemed “useless” as a means of justification for a new wall that will keep people out. The wall is directed at certain bodies and created to keep a white American public safe. As Brown asserts, “Walls built around political entities cannot block out without shutting in, cannot secure without making securitization a way of life, cannot define an external ‘they’ without producing a reactionary ‘we,’ even as they also undermine the basis of that distinction.”<sup>67</sup> Walls are built with the intent to shut out, but in reality, work to bind and keep in a particular population. They solidify the dichotomy between who has legitimate access to the nation and who is worth shutting out.

Brown’s focus on the maintenance of sovereignty through walls points to the dismissal of migrant bodies and lasting effects of understanding the border as a site of disgust. Throughout Sarah Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she writes about the ways in which populations bind emotionally and affectively. Her consideration of borders accounts for a collective mentality that is an important social tool in understanding who we identify















with or against. Borders are the nation's defense, but they are "like skin; they are soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others."<sup>68</sup> Borders are particularly soft areas as they are not only where the nation meets a racialized other, but a necessary point of entry for goods, capital, and labor. After all, "Porous borders, the story goes, permit the flow of drugs, crime, and terror into a civilized nation whose only crime is to have been too prosperous, generous, tolerant, open, and free."<sup>69</sup> The nation exposes itself to dangerous bodies at its borders. Policies like Prevention through Deterrence have deliberately endangered migrants as a means of national security that has continuously solidified into larger structures. The result, regardless of what the American right might suggest, is not a safer nation, but deadlier conditions for all peoples moving across borders. Binding the nation against an "invading" migrant caravan as Donald Trump declared in November of 2018 pushes people into deliberate danger to erase not only their lives, but the violence done against them.<sup>70</sup> Willfully pushing migrants into the desert is the continuation of violent legacies in the borderlands that asserts lives in the borderlands are not worth saving, protecting, or even acknowledging.

*Fatal Migrations* and 2666 both predate the gradual building of the Trump administration's wall on the US-Mexico border, but both works illustrate the escalation of fortification at the expense of certain bodies. In other words, both works illustrate how the silence that surrounds deaths is necessary for the continuation of the border itself. Begley and Bolaño both illustrate the need for recovery of each death as a means of resistance and recognition for the lasting legacies of borders. Importantly, the move to build a physical wall along border is just the most visible way the US has vilified peoples moving across borders. Immigration policy has steadily shifted toward increasingly inhumane policy and conditions not only for border crossers, but asylum seekers and refugees. The Trump administration has moved to decrease the number of refugees the United States takes from 30,000 to 18,000 in the year 2020.<sup>71</sup> Importantly, this accounts for the total refugees entering the United States, not only those attempting to enter through the US-Mexico border. Refugees and asylum seekers have a right to seek entry into the country through legal means, but policies like Remain in Mexico have increasingly vilified their efforts and forced them into dangerous circumstances. Starting in November 2019, the Trump administration's Remain in Mexico policy made the standards for applying for asylum much more rigorous and mandated that applicants wait on the Mexican side of the border as their case made its way through the courts.<sup>72</sup> However, the refusal of refugees, policies like Prevention through Deterrence, the Trump administration's Remain in Mexico policy, and the construction of the wall across the border demonstrate a solidification of all borders against non-citizens. The continued walling of the southern border is not just aimed at Mexico or migrants moving across the desert, but all peoples attempting to make their way to and into the United States.


As of February 2020, the government has waived forty-one laws to build the border wall, many of them environmental.<sup>73</sup> In the first seven months of 2020, 120 migrant bodies had been recovered in southern Arizona.<sup>74</sup> Hundreds of women have been killed throughout Mexico in 2020, as well.<sup>75</sup> Despite a growing distance from the creation of *Fatal Migrations* in 2016 and the 2004 posthumous publication of 2666, the large amounts of death caused by the border persists. While the feminicides have seemingly "spread" throughout Mexico, the causes are largely same and continue to go unacknowledged.<sup>76</sup> Death is central throughout both works, emphasizing that bodies are material, ecological, and political. By focusing on the place of the body, Begley and Bolaño point to the complications of the region and assert the importance of recovering those lost as a consequence. The border between the United States and Mexico is a political, economic, and unnatural divide.




























Examining the lives and deaths of those in the borderlands calls attention to the inhumane processes of monitoring and maintaining the border. The realities of border violence persist while the silence that surrounds each death remains.

## Notes

1. Grupo Beta is an organization sponsored by the Mexican government aimed at the protection of human rights for migrants. They provide services including search and rescues, abuse documentation, legal services, and even assistance for migrants to return home. "Grupos Beta de Protección a Migrantes," Gobierno de Mexico, <https://www.gob.mx/inm/acciones-y-programas/grupos-beta-de-proteccion-a-migrantes> < <https://www.gob.mx/inm/acciones-y-programas/grupos-beta-de-proteccion-a-migrantes> >, accessed September 13, 2020. Written as an introduction, Daniel Alarcón's accompaniment to "Fatal Migrations" addresses the realities facing migrants along the border and explains Josh Begley's digital piece. Daniel Alarcón and Josh Begley, "Fatal Migrations: Some of The Places People Died While Trying to Cross The Border," *The Intercept* (blog), June 4, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/06/04/fatal-migrations/>. 
2. See Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). 
3. Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 67. 
4. Joseph Nevins's book, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Remaking of the US-Mexico Boundary*, clearly outlines the history of fortifying the US-Mexico border beginning in El Paso, TX and moving to San Diego, CA. The escalation of border security accounted for the natural world with an explicit turn to weaponizing it in the mid-1990s. Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War On "Illegals" and the Remaking of the US-Mexico Boundary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010). Also see, Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Melissa McCormick, Daniel Martinez, and Inez Duarte, "The 'Funnel Effect' & Recovered Bodies of Unauthorized Migrants Processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2005," (Binational Migration Institute Report Submitted to the Pima County Board of Supervisors, October 2006), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3040107>, which outlines how the rise in migrant deaths are the direct result of funneling them into dangerous environments. 
5. De León, *The Land of Open Graves*, 4. 
6. Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 1. 
7. Warwick Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (1995): 640-69. 
8. Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism", 643. 
9. Juanita Sundberg and Bonnie Kaserman, "Cactus Carvings and Desert Defecations: Embodying Representations of Border Crossings in Protected Areas on the Mexico-US Border," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 2007): 727-44, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d75j>. 
10. Sundberg and Kaserman, "Cactus Carvings," 738. 
11. Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 6. 
12. Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 1. 
13. Christina Holmes, *Ecological Borderlands: Body, Nature, and Spirit in Chicana Feminism*, Reprint ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 30. 
14. Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 140. 

15. Sundberg and Kaserman, "Cactus Carvings," 727–44. [↗](#)
16. Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Crossroads of Death," in *The Logics of Biopower and the War on Terror: Living, Dying, Surviving*, ed. C. Masters and E. Dauphinee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3–24. [↗](#)
17. Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 154. [↗](#)
18. Luke Turf, "Illegal immigrants turn dessert into trash dump," *Tucson Citizen*, August 17, 2003. [↗](#)
19. No More Deaths, "Footage of Border Patrol Vandalism of Humanitarian Aid, 2010–2017," January 17, 2018, video, 1:29, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqaslbj5Th8&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqaslbj5Th8&feature=emb_title). [↗](#)
20. Sundberg and Kaserman, "Cactus Carvings," 727–44. [↗](#)
21. Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 155. [↗](#)
22. Events like "The Migrant Trail" invite people (primarily American citizens) to hike from the border to Tucson, Arizona, actively encouraging participants to move through the desert landscape. Similarly John Annerio recreates migrant movement in his book *Dead in their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands in the New Era* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2009). [↗](#)
23. In Francisco Cantú's memoir *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, he writes about the movement of border patrol agents through the border landscape without caution or regard for the environment. In one instance, after a high speed chase with drug smugglers Cantú and another agent come across an abandoned truck which they "drove . . . into a wash until it became stuck, and we slashed the unpopped tire, leaving it there with the lights on and the engine running." Francisco Cantú, *The Line Becomes a River* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 30. [↗](#)
24. Alarcón and Begley, "Fatal Migrations." [↗](#)
25. Alarcón and Begley, "Fatal Migrations." [↗](#)
26. Some estimates are as high as 8,000 people who have died since the mid-1990s until now. The numbers are hard to track as many migrants are never recovered and the amount of inconsistencies between organizations. See James Verini, "How US Policy Turned the Sonoran Desert into a Graveyard," *New York Times*, August 18, 2020. [↗](#)
27. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii. [↗](#)
28. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13. [↗](#)
29. Holmes, *Ecological Borderlands*, 10. [↗](#)
30. See Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*; Andreas, *Border Games*; and De Leon, *Land of Open Graves*. [↗](#)
31. Jessica Auchter, "Border Monuments: Memory, Counter-Memory, and (b)Ordering Practices along the US-Mexico Border," *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 291–311. [↗](#)
32. Marcela Valdes, "Alone Among the Ghosts: Roberto Bolaño's 2666," *Nation*, November 2008. [↗](#)
33. Roberto Bolaño, *2666: A Novel*, trans. Natasha Wimmer, reprint ed. (London; New York: Picador, 2009), 353. [↗](#)
34. Bolaño, *2666*, 354. [↗](#)
35. Bolaño, *2666*, 353–4. [↗](#)
36. Bolaño, *2666*, 357. [↗](#)
37. See Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Elvia R. Arriola, "Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the US-Mexico Border" in *Making a Killing*:

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## Sounds from Nowhere: Reading Around *Raga-Jazz Style*

by Shantam Goyal | Articles, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** When Pandit Ravi Shankar began performing for Western audiences in the 1960s, his collaborative instinct for the meeting of Hindustani music and jazz was challenged by what he described as "shrieking, shouting, smoking, masturbating, and copulating" audiences of "strange young weirdos," according to Mick Brown writing for *The Telegraph*. We can only imagine the debates of high and low art which were fought between Shankar and George Harrison, Bud Shank, or even Tony Scott, who were few of his many collaborators from the West. Caught between its original referent and its appeal to learned style, jazz (with its roots in African-American history) is placed at the center of debates about authenticity, gatekeeping, and located-ness. Once something like "world music," composed through collaboration, fusion, and re-sampling, enters a space not used to any of the styles mixed into this world of music, it creates unique soundscapes. Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes, writing "On Musical Cosmopolitanism," looks at the course of sounds through the world to think of music "as a process in the making of 'worlds,' rather than a passive reaction to global 'systems'" (6). The world created is never an unproblematically imported ambience. A jazz club anywhere in the world does not always correspond to Dixieland, or Chicago, or New York, nor does it reveal the influence of Black labor-songs, vaudeville, or ragtime. This is where an album like Indian composer duo Shankar-Jaikishan's *Raga-Jazz Style* (1968) becomes interesting, compressing 11 ragas from Hindustani music into curt pieces corresponding to different, morphed forms of jazz. By looking at the history of the circulation of interfused styles of jazz in America, Goa, Bombay, and mainstream Hindi cinema, this paper examines the material conditions of creativity, and attempts to inscribe this global creative collaboration of forms into a connected history of jazz and Hindustani music.

**KEYWORDS** bollywood, fusion, Hindustani, jazz, music, raga

What is, or was, on the mind of Marley in those slow, ganja inspired, Jamaican complaints about Babylon and the march to an African Zion, is not on the minds of those who play him at parties in Chicago. Again, this is no argument against the alternative uses to which music can be put, but it does add a note of clarity about the limits of hybridity in the widely advertised, but still somewhat dubious, emergence of a world culture.

—Timothy Brennan, "World Music Does Not Exist"

Kadri Gopalnath passed away in 2019. The renowned Carnatic saxophonist's obituary in *The New York Times* said that he "first heard the alto saxophone at a performance by the Mysore Palace Band, a holdover from the years of British rule that mixed Indian and European repertoire."<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, he brought the saxophone to South Indian classical music and influenced many Indo-Jazz musicians. I had not heard of him before he was mentioned to me by an American classmate in Buffalo, New York.

This is how music is heard: in bottomless streams. We need not step into different music venues on different nights—all bracketed by style, genre, region, and language—to listen to sounds new and unfamiliar. Nor is our familiarity with a musical tradition contingent on where our dot is on the map, though it is contingent on class, native language, and dominant second-languages. As a middle-class middle-school student in Delhi many years ago, I never listened to anything other than music from Hindi cinema, until I made friends from “better” neighborhoods who made me listen to, of all things, *Owl City*. Much later I would begin listening to jazz to be able to make intelligent conversation with my English degree classmates in college, and begin recollecting the many times I had heard echoes of the syncopated oddity in Bollywood music.

This “global imagination” is what Veit Erlmann thinks of as us reaching out beyond our immediate experiences in a gesture of understanding other contexts by transplanting and occasionally supplanting our knowledge into them.<sup>2</sup> The album *Raga-Jazz Style*,<sup>3</sup> released in 1968 by Hindi-film music composers Shankar-Jaikishan, faces this global imagination with music which comes neither from a linearity of tradition, nor from a set of rules developed in insular conditions, and not from one common historical consciousness. In this album, there is no protectionism for the Hindustani music tradition, and there is no assumption of any protectionism for jazz. It is music from nowhere because it revels in a collaborative autonomy which rejects located-ness, and because its sound is so multifariously recognizable that we cannot fixedly recognize it at all.

A commemorative postage stamp depicting Shankar-Jaikishan issued by the Government of India in 2013.

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The album has been made freely available on [deejay.de](https://www.deejay.de/Shankar_Jaikishan_Raga_Jazz_Style_OTR-001_Vinyl_267563) <  
[https://www.deejay.de/Shankar\\_Jaikishan\\_Raga\\_Jazz\\_Style\\_OTR-001\\_Vinyl\\_267563](https://www.deejay.de/Shankar_Jaikishan_Raga_Jazz_Style_OTR-001_Vinyl_267563)> in a  
re-issue by Outernational Sounds.<sup>4</sup> This is the track list for the album:

- A1: Raga Todi
- A2: Raga Bhairav
- A3: Raga Malkauns
- A4: Raga Kalavati
- A5: Raga Tilak Kamod
- A6: Raga Miyan Malhar
- B1: Raga Bairagi
- B2: Raga Jaijaiwanti
- B3: Raga Mishra Pilu
- B4: Raga Shivranjani
- B5: Raga Bhairavi<sup>5</sup>

As can be seen here, the album has eleven short pieces, each of which is named after the raga whose melody is folded into the jazz mold. We will go into more detail about Hindustani music in some time, but for the moment let us consider, or rather catch a glimpse of, what the album does with its sources. Take the third track on the album, titled "Raga Malkauns," which picks up one of the oldest "parent ragas"<sup>6</sup> of Hindustani music and renders it into a sub-three-minute composition with a dominant saxophone set to the rhythm of the drums, and a short sitar and table section in the middle. The restricted length makes it into an energetic, tightly composed piece of music tinged with Latin jazz sounds; it remains melodically recognizable as Malkauns even as it is performatively transformed. I say this with Adrian McNeil's work on Hindustani music in mind. McNeil understands a raga as an "unfolding,"<sup>7</sup> rather than a playing out, of the composition embedded within the raga, different from most Western sensibilities of music where a composition would be an "independent bounded entity against which the concept of improvisation can be oppositionally positioned."<sup>8</sup> For McNeil, the *bandish*, which is an element of a raga and is the closest conceptually to a conventional understanding of a fixed composition within the raga, still functions like a "seed idea"<sup>9</sup> which provides a "launching pad for creativity"<sup>10</sup> within the scaffolding provided by the raga and therefore is still different from the "complete and intentionally bounded"<sup>11</sup> understanding of composition in the west. The Malkauns of *Raga-Jazz Style* adapts the seed idea of the raga into a bound composition, simultaneously freeing it from the scaffolding of the raga and sectioning it into a neatly arranged musical track, fretting over little by way of rules and prescriptions. For me at the very least, the recognizability of the raga in the piece, reminding me of some of the longer performances of raga Malkauns I have heard in the past, soon ebbs and dissolves as it takes on a jovial, funky life of its own.

Much like this, each of the eleven short pieces in this album can be heard as examples of unfettered creativity—of that nowhere sound I mentioned earlier. But in calling *Raga-Jazz Style* a sound from nowhere, I am already rejecting the question which should face instances of seemingly free creative impulses: Is creativity without its own weight of history? Where does *Raga-Jazz Style* come from, if not from an entirely free association of ideas meant to simply create melodious music? Might it actually come from somewhere?

The possible answer we are looking for here can come from two places: first, from a study of the historical conditions which made this creative association possible. This study has a tenuous but productive relationship with what has come to be known as "global history"

which puts emphasis on connections and integration rather than on a "rhetoric of 'influence.'"<sup>12</sup> I say tenuous because in talking about the relationship between jazz and Hindustani music in this interfusion, we do have to address, albeit in passing, the power structures which determine the "positions" taken up by both of them. Global history does not ignore such inequalities, but it does resist methods of history which study origins as being rooted in nationality, and here we begin with America and India—albeit to eventually move away from narratives of origins.

The second possibility for an answer comes from our listening of the album. As mentioned earlier, it is a collection of eleven tracks which interfuse Hindustani music with different forms of jazz. Ragas like Todi, Bhairav, and Kalavati, among others, are rendered in styles such as bebop, blues, cool jazz, swing, and waltz, for pieces which last around three to five minutes each. The arrangement combines brass instruments and the drums with the sitar, the flute, and the tabla, amid larger orchestral elements. While it is tempting to go into a formal discourse about the intricacies of each of these eleven pieces, I am here more interested in getting *to* the album, rather than getting *into* the album. What concerns me more is, for example, whether the album can be placed within the prominent tradition of Indo-Jazz at all, because it is unlike most prominent Indo-Jazz. We do know that the album follows from a then nascent tradition of Indian music transported to the West and sometimes brought back to India, which according to Peter Lavezzoli's account is a process that begins in 1955.<sup>13</sup> Through the respective, and eventually connected histories of Hindustani music and jazz, we can listen for the constituent sounds of "raga-jazz," and understand their coming together to find the root of the creative impulse which composes music from the world for the world, all the while being of nowhere.

## A Short History of Worldly Jazz

Universalist and ethnically assertive points of view, it must be emphasized, often coexist in the same person.... On the one hand, performers are proud to play music that inspires musicians and audiences beyond its culture and country of origin; on the other, many object to the attempts of non-African Americans to gloss over the African American cultural origins and leadership in the music through the language of equality.

—Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*

Let me start here with something fairly obvious: Jazz is not a monolith created in Dixieland. Through a century-long history, it has shaped and reshaped itself from its vaudevillian and ragtime roots into swing, big band, bop, cool jazz, and free jazz.<sup>14</sup> During this time, it has undergone repeated renewal by standing under varied umbrellas such as orchestral, classical, and pop, transporting and translating itself to interfuse with music from across the world. Formally, it is not a monolith.

But one can argue for a monolithic cultural root for jazz, seeing as even before the early 1900s, what would eventually become the vivacious rhythmic flair of the music had already been forced to enter the US with the slave trade, which is the moment of this narrative where framing jazz history within national boundaries is no longer possible. The rhythms which came to define the sound were consecrated in the folk memory of Black Americans in the form of field songs, honks, shouts, calls, and responses.<sup>15</sup> To Ajay Heble, studying

dissonance in jazz, it seems "odd that a music so clearly rooted in social processes, in struggles for access to representation and identity formation, should give rise to such formalist models of aesthetic analysis."<sup>16</sup> In one of these analyses, the constant renewal of jazz moving towards the dissonance of Charlie Parker's bebop or Ornette Coleman's free jazz can be heard as a desire to keep sound shocking, and to keep moving away from spaces in which it was becoming too familiar and comfortable for white audiences.<sup>17</sup>

When this music is taken away from its social rootedness and transported to fuse with African, South American, Asian, and subcontinental musical traditions, including Hindustani music, is this to be read as a history of deracination? Of a sound being made of the world against its will, becoming world music to audiences unaware of the ethnic and linguistic consciousness which informs the sounds they are listening to? After all, an understanding of world music, the academic definitions of which we will get to in a few moments, has to go beyond creative collaboration. A jazzist like Herbie Hancock too, delivering lectures on "The Ethics of Jazz" at an event introduced by Homi Bhabha, may talk of the "touch," the "passion," and the "feel" for sound and musical listening in jazz which have come to define an intensely spiritual ethic of composing music. But, he admits, even the creative hospitality of a jazz stage where no musician is trying to upstage or be in subservience to another is tied to issues of social justice, globalization, and neo-liberalism which give direction to the collaborative aesthetics of jazz.<sup>18</sup> One way to think through this problem is to question whether jazz is world music at all, or better yet, to think of what world music really means.

Timothy Brennan offers a definition of world music partly offset by the title of his essay, "World Music Does Not Exist." What he means to say with this title is that world music does not exist as an unproblematic creative space with the freedom to borrow or co-opt or sample. Instead, it is for him is a hope wherein one can conceive of "a different kind of world, free from imperial domination" where alternative models of creating and listening to music can "subvert the ideological parochialism of Euro-American popular music . . . helping to dismantle the cultural logic of Western popular music."<sup>19</sup> The term world music, however, as it is often commercially used, is less about understanding the world's music and more about sounds being made to enter new soundscapes, and quite importantly, new markets.<sup>20</sup> Understanding the world's music is something that ethnomusicologists do, and not music companies, I would imagine. Gerry Farrell has a jocular quip about this: "World Music is fun, colorful, sexy, and saleable, whereas ethnomusicology is serious, rigorous, dull, and academic." For him, world music is the "aural equivalent of the package holiday."<sup>21</sup> American Jazz in this case might as well be an established market of listening consumers where the product of Hindustani music is brought in as a passing fad until another music takes its place, much like the consumer cycle of any new-fangled product. But that means I would be contending that jazz is the big-bad-cannonball in its transaction with other musical traditions, and that it co-opts or even appropriates other musical traditions as the more powerful partner in any musical collaboration. And this is not true.

This becomes clear in two arguments by Joachim-Ernst Berendt in a piece from 1968. The first and primary contention is that jazz is by birth syncretistic in that it was the result of an "encounter" between Africa and Europe, borne out of a struggle for representation and cultural space in the American milieu.<sup>22</sup> Second, after the Second World War, there was a breakdown of dialogue between the Black and the white man.<sup>23</sup> The growing sense of exasperation amongst figures like Malcolm X made space for a breaking away from Christianity as several Black jazz musicians embraced Islam and took up Arabic names too, feeling a stronger comradeship not with the white American but with others who had

struggled with their cultural identities through colonialism.<sup>24</sup> Damon Phillips, in his book *Shaping Jazz: Cities, Labels, and the Global Emergence of an Art Form*, has another interesting observation to this end. He notes that jazz which came from “disconnected” cities, that is, cities which were not seen as centers of the music in the way New York or Chicago were, often had more appeal on account of it having more novelty<sup>25</sup>—even the market of jazz rewarded the decentering of its music. This is not to quell any and all discussion of hierarchies when jazz meets Hindustani music, but rather to demonstrate that the claim for both forms of music to meet halfway is one which is possible to make, or imagine.

## Indian Jazz and the American Hindustani

Speaking of hierarchies, or the lack thereof, the first facet of the encounter between Hindustani music and jazz was still conspicuously colonial, as Warren R. Pinckney Jr.’s work suggests. Jazz in 1920s came in the form of touring bands which mostly performed for Europeans audiences in India.<sup>26</sup> By the 1930s and 1940s, musicians from Goa and Bombay were performing regularly in spaces frequented by the educated urban bourgeoisie, and it was for a time a “lucrative business” in the cities.<sup>27</sup> This era drew to a close with Western developments in jazz leaving the Indian big-band version behind, and also with a rejection of Western cultural imports after the Indian freedom struggle.<sup>28</sup> While a small stratum of Anglo-American listeners in Bombay kept the fledgling jazz tradition of India alive, that too withered away with most of that audience emigrating to the West.<sup>29</sup> Jayson Beaster-Jones traces the influence of Goans in Indian Jazz to Portuguese colonialism which was different from British indirect rule: “Their [Goans’] education in Western classical and international popular musics, as well as their proficiency in Western musical instruments, made them valuable contributors to the musical life of the British colonialists.”<sup>30</sup> This confluence between India and American Jazz, which was not exactly a fusion of two musical traditions yet, set the stage for what was to happen in the 1960s.

This second facet of the encounter is much closer to the “saleable” aspect of world music mentioned earlier. It is close to 1960s when Indian music becomes a part of Western pop-culture. In an exchange effected by the demands of the market, Farrell believes that there was an audience of musicians and listeners alike who were scraping for new sounds once advanced technology made aggressive sampling of music possible.<sup>31</sup> The sitar therefore was “dragged into the service of pop”<sup>32</sup> and Ravi Shankar became a familiar face of this new sound for the west when “differences in musical form were no protection against the popular music world’s voracious appetite for unusual sounds.”<sup>33</sup> Shankar’s audiences would majorly consist of jazz enthusiasts even before his techniques came to be learned and sometimes adopted without rigorous learning by Western musicians.<sup>34</sup>

From then on it was a dizzying vision of rapid cultural transactions as George Harrison began a liaison with the sitar and several short-lived pop experiments with Indian classical traditions began to find their way into the pop charts, much to the chagrin of Ravi Shankar himself who did not lay much store by the many theories of affinity between jazz and Hindustani music and thought they were overstated.<sup>35</sup> For jazzists specifically, it was a logical move forward in their links with Islamic, Arabic, and Indian cultures.<sup>36</sup> However, Shankar’s collaborations with jazz musicians, often outside the pop framework, set up a model for the Indo-Jazz genre, which might seem like a label under which something like *Raga-Jazz Style* fits comfortably.

The Shankar-Jaikishan album was not an international collaboration, but rather a group of musicians trained in Hindustani music playing with Goan jazz artists prominent in Bombay at the time. The commercial context within which a duo of Hindi film composers created an album outside of their popular film work was different from the ethos of Indo-Jazz. In Indo-Jazz, there was a move eastward as compositions tended to be set within rhythmic structures of Hindustani music<sup>37</sup> while *Raga-Jazz Style* used Hindustani music melodically playing with jazz instruments within a tempo and rhythm already present in American Jazz. The album is a node in these connected histories of the two musics, but as an Indian recording of Indo-Jazz, at least at the time, it did not follow in the Indo-Jazz tradition.

Another argument which may be made to the same end concerns the market, about which Steven Feld wrote, “no matter how inspiring the musical creation, no matter how affirming its participatory dimension,” World music responds to globalization’s constant need for more markets, and for more marketable things.<sup>38</sup> In fact, he sees world music as being complicit in the rise of “a kind of consumer-friendly multiculturalism.”<sup>39</sup> This need for constant renewal of the musical commodity strangely works alongside what was mentioned earlier about aggressive innovation in jazz being a mode of disrupting the comfort and expectations of its white audiences. What comes to mind here is Marshall Berman’s best-known work *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. In this, he finds the link between the market and aesthetic innovation. For Berman, “stability can only mean entropy, slow death, while our sense of progress and growth is the only way of knowing for sure that we are still alive.”<sup>40</sup> Constant renewal means constant destruction and creation, and the unease of not being able to settle and not being able to stop the constant fleeting motion from one artistic innovation to another. The unease is what tells us that the art world is thriving, and the unease itself is driven by technological modernity within the framework of capital. If recording technology can drive a demand for new sounds to sample, then the collaborative aesthetic of world music and fusion is definitely taking place within the market.

*Raga-Jazz Style* diverges from this, in that it is commercially shrouded, almost hidden like a “collector’s item” amid the much more commercially popular film work of Shankar-Jaikishan. This is to say it did not follow in the tradition of Indo-Jazz fusion prominent at the time even when it comes to the logic of the market for which the music was being made. This still leaves for us the question, however, of what *Raga-Jazz Style* does to the traditions from which it does follow.

## Diluting Together Raga and Jazz

Before the era of the phonograph, Hindustani classical musicians not only took inspiration from their listeners, but also improvised directly in response to their reactions. The exact sound and shape of the performance, then, was determined in part by the interaction of artist and audience.

—Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*

Katz’s comment on Hindustani music is a short tangent from his larger study of the phonograph and how modalities of listening changed with technological interventions in sound—and how creative practices of music changed along with it. While a protectionist attitude is thought to be characteristic of Hindustani and perhaps Carnatic traditions of

Indian music, it has not kept the traditions from changing. Sarod played Ustad Amjad Ali Khan spoke about this in a recent interview:

In India, we blindly worship the convention whether it is religion or classical music. There is nothing wrong, and I also did it all my life. But tradition allows innovation. My father (Hafiz Ali Khan) who was my guru gave me liberty to go ahead with my thoughts and views.<sup>41</sup>

Such histories which are written about the onslaught of music-recording technologies, and the sea change that they brought about in the circulation and performance of music, often betray a sense of loss rather than one of anticipation. Whether we think of these changes as the dilution of a classical aesthetic or not, it is clear that technological innovation, a change in the modes of musical reception, and the changing marketability of classical sound charted the course from the courtly tradition to *Raga-Jazz Style*.

In a 1980 book on changes in the reception of Hindustani music in the twentieth century, Vim Van der Meer finds a link between the changing audience makeup and the slow disappearance of classical modes of performance such as Dhrupada. While clearly preferring the superior knowledge possessed by Dhrupada musicians, Meer finds that its esoteric content did not sit too well with urban audiences for whom a deep familiarity with idioms of classical music was not thought to be necessary to attend its performance.<sup>42</sup> His analysis is fascinating in its indirect observations of audience behaviour, speaking of tea stalls outside the performance venue which would be filled up as soon as a Dhrupada singer began in the lineup of performances scheduled for the day.<sup>43</sup> Urban middle-class audiences, distinctly knowable by how they spoke and attired themselves, would fill up both the rich social spaces of concert halls and also the cheaper open-air performances.<sup>44</sup>

Keeping this historical vignette in mind, what if we were to think about the change in the concept of the raga itself, much before it gets to *Raga-Jazz Style*? Meer observes that a raga was not meant to be a melodic frame. Rather, as a set of rules which were not designed to be understood literally, the emotive capability of a raga was meant to be housed within its intonation and its construction through successive phrases.<sup>45</sup> Such a model of performance is only barely and loosely related to the improvisational model of jazz performance. McNeil goes as far as to suggest that there exists no word in any of the Indian languages which means exactly what improvisation means in English, preferring to see the boundary between fixed and unfixed material in a raga as a lot more ambiguous.<sup>46</sup> As he points out the differences between improvisation in bebop jazz and unfolding in Hindustani music, he finds it difficult to come up with a fixed definition for ragas, and takes solace in metaphors, like the one comparing the raga to a seed which contains the possibility of the tree within it.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore hard to come up with a suitable rubric with which we can compare the jazz and Hindustani elements of any of the eleven pieces in *Raga-Jazz Style*, even in terms of affect. There is some room to judge the emotive content of jazz through the spaces in which it was performed, and perhaps forward an analysis looking at the nightclub scene of small jazz venues where distracted listening has never been a problem and music is intimately part of the smoky sociability of the clubs. This cannot be compared to affect in Hindustani music without exploring at length its connection with the rasa theory, which suggests that certain ragas evoke particular and sustained moods within their listeners, and guide their performers.<sup>48</sup> There is also the idea of performance-hours being associated with ragas, with some reserved for midnight, some other for dawn, and so on, which define the general mood of a raga. As Meer

suggest, however, "the time-theory must be kept separate." As such, "Its roots may be ritual or cosmological, but at present it is a mere custom."<sup>49</sup>

We can but go back to Ravi Shankar's experiences of performing Hindustani music for jazz audiences in the 1960s to find a certain disjunct in the artist's expectations from the audience. Farrell writes that the sounds of India in conjunction with Western forms of music were viewed through a kind of beatitude.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, performances such as Ravi Shankar's were received through the "Western prism of a consumerist, quasi-mystical counter-culture, which had little or nothing to do with the music or its traditions."<sup>51</sup> Shankar himself, however, demanded a form of concentrated listening which was largely absent from his concert audiences. He was dismissive of the smoking, drinking, and drug-use which was a general characteristic of a lot of the concert venues he performed at, also perplexed at the relaxed sexual mores within which respect for the musician was put aside and music could become one part of the larger soundscape of the audience's enjoyment.<sup>52</sup> A remark by sitarist Nikhil Banerjee sits well here. When asked in an interview to comment on Ravi Shankar's fusion experiments, he answered:

No comment, no comment. But I definitely didn't like that duet with Mr. Yehudi Menuhin, *East Meets West*. No, I've heard Yehudi Menuhin many times; in Western music he's a different giant, but when he's playing some Indian music it is just like a child. For a stunt, it's OK, but I really disagree, I don't like this idea. You cannot mix up everything! It is not possible.<sup>53</sup>

Part of "You cannot mix up everything!" is what Ravi Shankar seems to have felt, though for different reasons. It must be said that his dismay is not meant to deny the presence of high seriousness in Western music, or even in American jazz specifically. Yet, it is also true that in the most popular jazz venues of the time, it was okay to be noisy.

But it was not as if concentrated listening had remained part of the *marketable* fabric of Hindustani music in India either, and this is where we can locate the "dilution" of a musical tradition which can then be incorporated into an album like *Raga-Jazz Style*. It is in the Hindi film industry that Hindustani music came to be incorporated into texts and visuals which, in a sense, was a logical continuation of the limiting of the raga to specific affective and melodic structures as discussed earlier. Jayson Beaster-Jones does a remarkable analysis of Shankar-Jaikishan's filmic music in a section entitled "The Cosmopolitanism of Shankar-Jaikishan" in his book on Bollywood music.<sup>54</sup> Commenting on their work in Raj Kapoor's 1951 film, *Awara*, Jones notes that Shankar-Jaikishan were known for their classical roots upon which they innovated in their work for film. They had "one of the largest orchestras of the time, an innovative use of harmony and chromatic melodies (including some atonal moments reminiscent of the composer Igor Stravinsky), as well as the sounds and orchestration of Dixieland jazz,"<sup>55</sup> a testament to their innovative outlook toward film music.





Their film compositions best exemplify the run up to *Raga-Jazz Style* in that their international influences were a result of their large orchestra including members from Goan dance troupes who used to perform in the nightclubs of Bombay. By the end of the 1960s, when the business of jazz clubs was no longer lucrative to the Western ethos of these Goan musicians, film music transformed from an occasional venture to a full-time career for them.<sup>56</sup> This shift is telling because as Jones notes, "Many of these musicians had a limited understanding of the Hindi language—and often little interest in Hindi language films—but nevertheless collaborated on the composition of Hindi film songs and helped





























enhance their cosmopolitan repertoire."<sup>57</sup> There was more work to be found in the Hindi film industry than in jazz clubs.






























I mentioned earlier that an album such as the one we are listening to here cannot be analyzed in the same fold as film music, because the commercial expectations of one are vastly different from the other. However, even the production of *Raga-Jazz Style* in 1968 comes through as a result of the lower cost of producing non-film music cassettes in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, Jones sees Shankar-Jaikishan's album at the beginning of a trend of Indi-pop music with which music companies tried to challenge the hegemony of film music, a movement which saw its heyday in the 1990s and continues today.<sup>58</sup> It is still within a market that, at the time, was beginning to show the ability to support such work, that music like this is able to emerge. Once this music emerges in *Raga-Jazz Style*, with the promise of breaking free, it necessarily comes to be reinscribed within new rules and limited in new ways. For instance, what an interfusion with jazz does to Hindustani music is not that far off from what earlier encounters with colonial interpretation did to it. By itself, Hindustani music did not adhere to precise notational guidelines, nor could it be circumscribed within its textual descriptions. Its performance practice was always meant to be ineffable to the extent that it eludes a form of scientific control,<sup>59</sup> while setting up controls upon which the musician can build. In saying this, I am looking at the same 1985 Nikhil Banerjee interview quoted earlier, where he talks about his discomfort with recording his music, and how he becomes "self-conscious" while recording.<sup>60</sup> He is okay, however, with recording live-concerts, but the "minimum time should be about one hour."<sup>61</sup> And then there is *Raga-Jazz Style*, with eleven different ragas merged with jazz in album which is just over half-hour long. Obviously, this is an unfair comparison or critique to make, wherein lies the difficulty of thinking about connected histories.

We cannot say anymore that this album is a sound from nowhere. In fact, the complex and richly problematic histories leading up to the album show that it is only through an encounter with modernity, with coloniality, and with the market forces of popular music that Hindustani music comes to be incorporated and interwoven into the cosmopolitan ethos of fusion music for Shankar-Jaikishan in 1968. In its composition, the album has not severed itself from either of its constituent pasts, yet it is not the sum of its parts, and nor is it more than the sum of its parts. It might as well be unfettered, unmediated creativity. In spite of this instinct, what I have tried to do here is to offer an argument for historicity, and to say that *Raga-Jazz Style* does indeed come from somewhere.

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## Political Blackness, British Cinema, and the Queer Politics of Memory

by Ashvin Kini | Articles, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** This essay queries "political Blackness" as a coalitional antiracist politics in England in the 1970s and 1980s. Contemporary debates on the relevance of political Blackness in contemporary British race politics often forget significant critiques of the concept articulated by feminist and queer scholars, activists and cultural producers. Through close readings of Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood's *The Passion of Remembrance* and Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, this essay examines cinematic engagements with political Blackness by foregrounding the gender and sexual fault lines through which queers and feminists articulated relational solidarities attentive to difference.

**KEYWORDS** Blackness, cinema, diaspora, feminism, Great Britain, queer, racism

The mass mobilizations in response to the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have been accompanied by calls for solidarity with Black communities in the global struggle against anti-Blackness. Activists Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sharmin Hossain of Equality Labs, for example, have written powerfully about the necessity of diasporic South Asian communities critically reflecting on our own complicities in anti-Blackness, including through the logics of casteism: "We are part of an ecosystem of complicity that allows for our individual privileges as non-Black people of color to be weaponized for further criminalization of Black people."<sup>1</sup> At the same time there have also been renewed calls to problematize terms such as "people of color" in the US and "Black, Asian, and minority ethnic" (BAME) in the UK for the ways that such terms can homogenize and conflate non-white experiences, often at the expense of Black communities.<sup>2</sup> Afropessimist scholar Jared Sexton, for example, has theorized what he calls "people-of-color-blindness": "a form of colorblindness...[that] misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy."<sup>3</sup> In order to contextualize these debates I return to an earlier historical instance where calls for Black-Asian solidarity were being articulated and contested, specifically the debates around "political Blackness" in the UK context.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, political Blackness emerged as a coalitional identity and praxis adopted by working-class Caribbean, African and South Asian migrants living in the United Kingdom. Rather than a sign of racial identity, political Blackness brought together various migrant racial and ethnic groups under a political identity based on their shared experience of British racism and the legacy of colonization. The strategic cross-racial and cross-ethnic coalitions engendered under the signifier "Black" worked against colonial policies of divide-and-rule that maintained white supremacy both in the former colonies and in the postcolonial metropole. As Stuart Hall has described it: "'Black' was made visible in its functioning as a discursive-political identity, a badge of identification adopted

by different cultural groups in their struggle against racism, in place of an ethnic signifier referring to the content of distinct cultural differences."<sup>4</sup> This adoption of Black as a political identity was thus framed as a way to create and sustain coalitional political communities through an emphasis on shared experience and social location within a racialized system of power. While contemporary critiques of political Blackness have rightly focused on its limitations as an identity rooted in a politics of racial equivalence, important critiques of political Blackness articulated by feminists and queers in the 1980s itself problematized any easy notion of solidarity based on shared experience. In conversation with US Black and women of color feminisms, queer feminist critiques of political Blackness sought to revitalize the concept through an emphasis on intersectional and relational frameworks that centered the gender and sexual politics of race. While political Blackness as an organizing identity politics has, as Jafari S. Allen writes, "disintegrated," the debates and contestations engendered by the scholarly, activist and creative output of British Black and Asian feminists and queers during this period remain important for critical genealogies of Black queer studies, Black feminisms, transnational and women of color feminisms, and queer of color critique.<sup>5</sup> Let me be clear: my purpose here is not to gaze back nostalgically at the historically specific formation of political Blackness in order to advocate for its recuperation for the present conjuncture. Rather I seek to highlight the vibrant queer and feminist engagements with and critiques of the concept in its historical moment in order to foreground the continued urgency of crafting political and critical frameworks attentive to the interlocking systems of white supremacy, racial capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy.

This essay queries cinematic articulations of political Blackness for queer and feminist antiracisms and anti-imperialisms. I read Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien's *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986) and Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), two films that are dissimilar in terms of their aesthetic styles and narrative structures, but nonetheless key texts of 1980s British cinema. Both films in different ways engage with the feminist and queer cultural politics that were instrumental in reassessing the potentially reductive solidarities underwriting the concept of political Blackness.<sup>6</sup> Read together these films interrogate, to varying degrees, the residues of empire in both British racism and elite postcolonial nationalisms in the late twentieth century by foregrounding the gender and sexual fault lines through which queers and feminists articulated relational solidarities attentive to difference. Political Blackness functions in *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* in three overlapping ways. First, it is a "multi-accentual" queer feminist politics that draws on multiple, nonequivalent histories of gendered racialization in postcolonial Britain, London specifically.<sup>7</sup> Second, political Blackness can be read as a mode of cinematic practice that queers the politics of racial representation. By violating dominant cinematic conventions—from the fragmenting of linear time and continuity to the unexpected intrusion of the ghostly—the films make legible (albeit unevenly) subjugated histories of racial and colonial violence, as well as the marginalization of women and queers of color in antiracist movements and cultural imaginaries. Finally, political Blackness in these films is a critical memory discourse, a multi-faceted haunting that makes visible the literal and metaphorical specters of the British empire. As Avery F. Gordon notes in her influential text *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, "Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with...[Haunting] alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as I discuss in more depth below, the films underscore the uneven legacies and residues of

British colonialism in the present in order to reckon with persistence of imperial racial ideologies as well as the masculinism of anticolonial and antiracist nationalisms.

## Political Blackness and British Cinema

In a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, Kwame Anthony Appiah described the “Black” in political Blackness as an umbrella term capacious enough to include “minorities with family origins in Asia and the Middle East as well as in Africa and its diaspora.” Appiah continues, “That’s not to say it was the sturdiest of umbrellas: It was never uncontested.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, among those engaged in contestations over the meanings and uses, the possibilities and limitations of political Blackness, feminists and queer activists and cultural producers articulated powerful intersectional critiques of the concept that unsettled the ease with which the term was evoked in the service of reductive solidarities rooted in the homogeneity and equivalence of experience. This unsettling of political Blackness by queers and feminists both reimagined and reanimated the concept by centering gender and sexuality as foundational to processes of racialization.

Black British feminisms emerged in conversation with and were influenced by the work of US Black and women of color feminisms that were articulating models of solidarity and strategic political coalition that did not rely only on the recognition of similarity, but also on reckoning with difference.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, these Black and women of color feminist formations attended not only to patriarchal domination but more radically to patriarchy’s co-constitution with white supremacy, capitalism, heteronormativity, and colonialism. By insisting on an analysis of intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression, feminist and queer conceptions of political Blackness constituted what Grace Kyungwon Hong has called a “comparative analytic of difference,” allowing for an interrogation of the increasingly uneven distribution of power within and across communities of color.<sup>11</sup> While coalition and collectivity are conventionally articulated through the recognition of commonality—for example, identification through a shared history of violence or trauma—women of color feminisms and queer of color formations are broadly concerned with the formation of collectivity through difference. As Hong and Roderick Ferguson remind us, “The mobilization of difference by women of color feminism and queer of color critique was intended not to erase the differentials of power, value, and social death within and among groups...but to highlight such differentials and attempt to do the vexed work of forging a coalitional politics through these differences.”<sup>12</sup> As noted by numerous British feminists, including Julia Chinyere Oparah, Avtar Brah, Pratibha Parmar, Heidi Safia Mirza, and Nydia A. Swaby, the most dynamic articulations of political Blackness were those that refused to consolidate into a reified identity grounded only in the similarity of experience and shared history.<sup>13</sup> Political Blackness, these scholars argue, was best understood as a critical discourse rooted in a differentiated and capacious definition of Blackness, one that was subject to constant self-reflection, reevaluation and revision.<sup>14</sup> Julia Chinyere Oparah, for example, writes in her study of Black British feminist activism, “[B]lackness is not the natural preserve of any set of actors. Neither is it likely to be embraced by all members of the diverse communities of African and Asian descent in Britain. However, this should not be a reason to give up on an inclusive definition of Blackness. Rather, it is its very oppositionality, its insistence on discussion and explanation, which makes ‘Black’ a useful sign.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than conceiving of political Blackness as a form of ethnic erasure, Oparah and other feminist scholars and activists referenced here insisted on using the concept as a strategic political framework with which to reckon with the differential workings of

gendered racialization and colonialism across British Black and Asian immigrant communities in the face of the overwhelming whiteness that organized British national identity.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the feminist and queer work cited above, Stuart Hall's classic essay "New Ethnicities" is foundational to my readings of *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* for his discussion of the shifts in Black British cultural politics in the context of emerging cinematic practices. Originally published in 1989, Hall's essay narrates the historical emergence of two phases or modes of Black British cultural politics that he argues were in dialectical tension with each other in the 1980s. The first is the coining of "Black" as a political identity of cross-racial solidarity based on the shared experience of British racism, despite the not insignificant differences of history, tradition and ethnicity. "'The Black experience,'" Hall argues, "as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference, became 'hegemonic' over other ethnic/racial identities—though the latter, of course, did not disappear."<sup>17</sup> Black communities were positioned at the margins of representation, as the "unspoken and invisible 'other' of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses."<sup>18</sup> The cultural politics of this "singular and unifying" mode of British Blackness intervened in the cultural arena by fighting not only for access to representation, but also by producing "positive" images to counter anti-Black negative stereotypes, to alter what Hall refers to as the "relations of representation." With few existing representations of British Blackness, it became the burden of Black cultural producers to speak *for* rather than speak *from* their communities.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Hall observes that another mode of Black British cultural politics was emerging that sought to move from a "struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself."<sup>20</sup> This emergent cultural discourse was marked by what Hall famously termed, echoing the work of Black feminists, "'the end of innocence,' or the end of the innocent notion of the essential Black subject," in which the singular category of race is unsettled to reveal its complex interminglings, crossings and intersections with other structures of power.<sup>21</sup> A Black British cultural politics that proceeds from an understanding of the contingency of identities and communities within particular historical conjunctures thus enables for Hall a more critical conception of solidarity, coalition and affiliation that "works with and through difference...[to] make common struggle and resistance possible without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities."<sup>22</sup> As I will demonstrate in my critical readings below, *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* fall within this second mode of Black cultural politics in that they both work to displace the notion of a unified Black British subject by centralizing gender and sexuality as co-constitutive structures of power with race, while also displacing hegemonic modes of representation in their search for new ways of narrating the complexities and contradictions of British racial formations.

Finally, Hall demonstrates that the emergent Black British cultural politics must be understood as a diaspora politics. If the dominant tendency in diaspora studies has been to assert that diasporic subject and community formations are produced primarily through the negotiation of material and affective relations to a lost homeland, Hall shifts his gaze to ask how diasporic communities are positioned within the societies they come to inhabit once they have left the homeland behind. In the context of Black British filmmaking in the 1980s, Hall writes,

In the case of the young Black British films and film-makers under discussion, the diaspora experience is certainly profoundly fed and nourished by, for example, the emergence of Third World Cinema; by the African experience; the connection with Afro-Caribbean experience; and the deep inheritance of complex systems of representation and aesthetic traditions from Asian and African culture. But, in spite of these rich cultural “roots,” the new cultural politics is operating on new and quite distinct ground—specifically, contestations over what it means to be British.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, Hall locates the site of diasporic culture and critique not only in the complex relationship to a homeland of the past, but also in the “new and quite distinct” context of a diasporic present. Invoking Paul Gilroy’s influential work, Hall goes on to say, “Fifteen years ago we didn’t care, or at least I didn’t care, whether there was any black in the Union Jack. Now not only do we care, we *must*.”<sup>24</sup> As articulated in his emphatic *must*, diaspora is in this context fundamentally an intersectional racial analytic, mobilized to problematize and contest the inherent whiteness of British national identity as it is rooted in histories of British colonialism and slavery. Importantly, this call for a more capacious definition of Britishness is not an assimilationist project. If assimilation is defined through a temporal logic of inclusion where racialized migrants shed their past histories, cultures, languages, customs, and community formations to align themselves with a future-oriented white British modernity, Hall’s insistence that one must care whether there is any Black in the Union Jack forces us to reckon with the stubborn persistence of the past as it impinges on the present and future, a thematic strain that runs through both *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, to which I now turn.

## **“Who Will Hear Me Now as I Remember, and Talk of Remembering?”: *The Passion of Remembrance***

Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien’s *The Passion of Remembrance* was released in 1987 from the Sankofa Film and Video Collective. Sankofa was one of a number of Black film and video workshop collectives that were funded by the Greater London Council and Channel 4 in the aftermath of antiracist rebellions that had occurred in Notting Hill and Brixton in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These workshop collectives, which included John Akomfrah’s Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo Film and Video Workshop, and Retake Film and Video Workshop, were integral in the development of Black British independent film. Within these various workshops, young, mostly second generation Black British filmmakers staged important interventions in the politics of Black cinematic representation. Hamid Naficy observes that the workshops, though distinct from each other, shared some common thematic and political concerns: “Driven by the politics and poetics of decolonization, postcolonial diasporism, and critical theory, the workshops...questioned not only the mainstream media’s stereotyping and misrepresentation on the black and subaltern subjects but also representation itself.”<sup>25</sup> In regard to the latter issue, Black film and video collectives often experimented with form as a way to deconstruct and problematize modes of cinematic representation and address that structured both mainstream commercial narrative cinema as well as documentary realism, particularly as it functioned as a mode of colonial knowledge in producing the visual repertoire of the racialized, colonized “Other.”<sup>26</sup> Sankofa set itself apart from many of the other workshops

in its focus on the intersection of race and colonialism with discourses of gender and sexuality. As Isaac Julien himself put it, "Sankofa consists of three Black women and myself, a Black gay man. Although there are workshops that have women and gay members, these issues have been a central political starting point for us."<sup>27</sup>

*The Passion of Remembrance* is a multilayered text comprised of three separate but interwoven strands. First, there is the esoteric "Speaker's Drama" which features monologues and a conversation between an unnamed Black woman and Black man. These figures speak directly to the camera in talking head style interviews in which they remember and narrate their experiences of British racism and their involvement in antiracist struggles. The Black woman is a key figure in the film and throughout the Speaker's Drama she consistently calls into the question the gendered exclusions and oversights of the Black man's political philosophy, especially in the more confrontational scenes that occur in the film's second half. The second layer of the film is a more straightforward domestic narrative centered on Maggie Baptiste, a young aspiring filmmaker who lives with her brother, Tony, and her parents, Benjy and Gloria, immigrants from Saint Lucia. Maggie's friends Louise, Gary, and Michael (who are a couple) are also close with the family. Depicting the multi-generational Baptiste family allows the film to explore gender, sexual, and generational differences in relation to British racism and Black cultural politics. The conflicts between the various characters in the Baptiste family, as well as the man and woman of the Speaker's Drama, are reflective of how *The Passion of Remembrance* views Blackness not as a reified, coherent or stable identity, but rather as a site of continual contestation. The final layer of the film is comprised of archival documentary footage of protests and demonstrations in the 1970s and 1980s. This footage, edited together and presented as Maggie's experimental film work, also functions as a film within the film—the audience watches Maggie's documentary along with the characters. In shifting back and forth between these three strands, violating cinematic codes of linear temporality and narrative causality, *The Passion of Remembrance* suggests that Black subjectivities and politics are constituted not through a linear, developmental logic, but rather by the dynamic interaction of discursive and representational forms, between history and memory, past, and present.

The opening montage of the film depicts groups of Black and South Asian women participating together in protests and demonstrations—standing on picket lines in the rain, holding signs, distributing leaflets and pamphlets, marching in the streets with their fists in the air, laughing and smiling and shouting together. Soft, reflective music plays over these images, which are sometimes interrupted by the figure of Angela Davis speaking at a podium, attesting to the influence of US Black feminisms on Black British feminisms. These very first images in the film centralize the participation and involvement of Black women and women of color at the frontlines of antiracist political struggles. This montage bleeds into the first monologue of the Speaker's Drama, in which the woman speaker recounts her memories of her gendered experiences organizing against the racism of the 1970s:

Listening to the brothers, to their needs, wants. All the time listening, as they spoke, talked, demanded their right to be men. Then concentrating on how to rebuild them into men, fashioned into an image of their own choosing. Helping them, supporting them by always being there. Making the tea, coffee, curry, patties. Organizing the benefits, licking the stamps. Trying never to refuse. Later on having babies, running the home, whilst taking care of everything. Feeling tired at the beginning of the day... It was always important to be on the scene...Being an active conscious sister. Fashioned in an image designed for, but not by her.

In this opening monologue the woman speaker narrates the extent to which Black women were simultaneously active agents in organized political protest but also often sidelined to carry out the devalued reproductive labor that sustains protest—listening, supporting and “rebuilding” the men, caring for the children, cooking the food, managing the domestic space, and providing administrative support (“organizing the benefits, licking the stamps”). According to the speaker, women were relegated to the role of supporter, listener, and caregiver, their attention and participation focused on addressing the needs and wants of men but never their own interests as Black women. “Being a conscious active sister” was an externally defined positionality, “designed for, but not by her.” As this monologue demonstrates, the revolutionary subject of 1970s British antiracist political struggles is gendered male, with the woman never having the opportunity to articulate a revolutionary subjectivity on her own terms. The monologue thus operates on two levels. First, by describing the ways in which Black women’s labor has historically been devalued by male leaders of antiracist struggles the monologue offers a pointed critique of the masculinism of antiracist organizing, thereby insisting on an understanding of racism as one vector of power that is differentially experienced with regard to gender. Second, the monologue also opens up a space in which to articulate a Black feminist politics that is not only critical of the history Black nationalism but more importantly also generative of other kinds of future-oriented political subjectivities, identities, and movements rooted in an intersectional analysis of power within struggles for justice.

This sense of critically reflecting on the past in order to formulate new kinds of political identities and movements for the future is the central theme of the narrative sections of the film, which focus on the domestic drama of the Baptiste family. The family functions in multiple ways in the film. On the one hand, the family is a site of care, comfort, and support in the face of the racial and class stratifications of British society. Indeed, the film’s introduction of the Baptiste family as they watch a game show on television is one of incredible warmth. At the same time, the family and the space of the home is also a site of conflict in which the diversity of Black experiences are represented and negotiated, especially in terms of gender, sexual, and generational difference. The film is careful not to present the generational and gender conflicts of the Baptiste family in static terms. Affiliations between the various characters cut across gender and generation at different moments, creating a network of shifting affinities that do not easily resolve themselves in the binary oppositions of parent versus child, man versus woman, brother versus sister. This aspect of the narrative sections of the film thus provides a useful counterpoint to the *Speaker’s Drama*, which runs the risk of homogenizing the experiences of Black communities in the binary opposition between the unnamed man and woman speakers.<sup>28</sup>

The gendered differences in political viewpoint between Maggie and her elder brother Tony form one of the central conflicts in the Baptiste family and also help situate the debate between the man and woman in the *Speaker’s Drama* within a specific context. For example, during a scene in which Maggie and her friends discuss the particularity of Black queer experiences, Tony is quick to accuse them of diluting their minds with the “white informed” issues of gender and sexuality. For Tony, as for the man in the *Speaker’s Drama*, Blackness and Black politics are hindered when the experiences of Black women and Black queers are articulated in their specificity; conversations about gender and sexuality direct attention away from the “real” politics of race. As Tony says to Maggie, “You and I should be defining our own perspectives. Things should be informed by us for us.” Channeling the woman in the *Speaker’s Drama*, Maggie replies, “‘By us for us!’ That’s the ideal, but the ideal’s not what’s happening is it? What’s happening is you informing us. It’s *your* perspectives that you want to inform us about. You’re not really hearing anyone else...At

the end of the day it's about how you define things because you've got the power." Like the woman in the Speaker's Drama, Maggie's critical posture toward Tony performs the dual function of intervening in the political imaginary of the past by pointing to the gendered distribution of power within antiracist struggles while also gesturing to other models of affiliation grounded in a multivalent analysis of race, gender, and sexuality.

Thus far my discussion of *The Passion of Remembrance* has focused on the queer feminist interventions it makes at the level of character and narrative. While these aspects of the film are undoubtedly compelling, they are all the more significant when considered alongside the film's brilliant experiments with cinematic form. In an interview with Richard Fung, Isaac Julien elaborates on Sankofa's commitment to experimenting with form as the means to both critique and generate new modes of cinematic representation: "We came to the conclusion that if we were to start negotiating our identities within the cinema that we'd have to somehow start to negotiate a film language that would actually try not to reproduce dominant ideology but would reproduce our desires and our politics. We also wanted there to be a politics of representation within the work that we produced."<sup>29</sup> As stated above, the three layers of *The Passion of Remembrance*—the Speaker's Drama, the Baptiste family narrative, and Maggie's documentary montages—are not presented in isolation. The film repeatedly shifts between them, violating the rules of continuity, linearity, and narrative. Each element of the film interconnects with another and there are moments where they seem to bleed into each other. For example, during a particularly tense moment in Maggie and Tony's final argument an abrupt jump cut takes the viewer back to the Speaker's Drama. The conversation continues as if uninterrupted with the unnamed woman taking over where Maggie left off. This strategy is mirrored in the formal structure of Maggie's experimental films as well, which are arguably the centerpiece of *The Passion of Remembrance*. As Maggie describes them to her friends—and the viewer—"What we're going to be witnessing is archival footage of demonstrations, festivals, things like that. I've edited them all together to form a montage of images of protest and celebration of solidarity." The montages themselves, such as the one described above that opens the film, present footage from a vast array of movements, including protests for worker's rights, queer liberation, racial justice, and women's rights. As the camera lingers on the faces and bodies of the protesters what emerges is a moving celebration of the spirit and labor of social justice movements and activists. Yet in the suturing together of what Tony and the man in the Speaker's Drama see as separate issues of labor, gender, sexuality, and race, Maggie's filmmaking practice insists on seeing continuity and overlap between these issues and the movements they inspire. In her films, Maggie is engaged in the complex work of trying to articulate what Julien refers to as a film language, a politics of representation that can encompass the specificity of struggles of racial, gender, class, and sexual justice while also attending to the convergences between them.

Maggie is thus engaged in the work of "queer curation," which Gayatri Gopinath has recently defined as a project of care-taking—of caring *for* and caring *about* the past with the "obligation to impart that 'caring about' to others."<sup>30</sup> In the selection and juxtaposition of images, sounds, and effects that make up her montages, Maggie is making connections in and through difference, moving between past and present, and in the process imparting the significance of those connections to her viewers—both to the viewers in the film and to us, the viewers of *The Passion of Remembrance*. As Maggie's friends watch, discuss and debate her films, the viewer is also invited into the conversation by having to think through the complexities of the distinct but imbricated histories of powerful resistance to British empire and white supremacist heteropatriarchy that Maggie has so carefully presented to us. What we are left with at the end of *The Passion of Remembrance* is not only a narrative

dramatization of the ways in which Black women and queers have been marginalized in antiracist struggles, but also a critical conversation about the necessity of building alliances across difference in order to construct alternative political imaginaries and worlds. Maggie's documentary montages, and indeed, *The Passion of Remembrance* itself, can be read as a cinematic act of queer re-membering. By "re-membering" I am not referring to the project of recuperating and restoring that which was once whole. Rather, the queerness of Maggie's curatorial filmmaking practice resides in her careful assembly of discarded, devalued, and forgotten fragments of memory, stitching them together not in the service of nostalgic reminiscences of what once was, but rather as critical imaginings of other kinds of relationalities that might yet come into being.<sup>31</sup>

## Empire's Black Queer Hauntings: *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*

Like *The Passion of Remembrance*, Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* critically explores the past as it bears upon the present. However, it is different from *Passion* in important ways. *Passion* focuses primarily on the internal gender and sexual dynamics of Black British communities in order to displace the notion of a unified Black radical subject, which was mirrored in the film's non-linear, fragmented visual and narrative style. *Sammy and Rosie* is less formally experimental in the sense that it stays within the realm of fictional narrative, although the introduction of the supernatural in the film's final act departs from the conventions of cinematic realism. Through its depiction of the racial and gender diversity of postcolonial London, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* mobilizes tropes of memory and haunting to trace the continuities between British colonialism and contemporary processes of differential racialization and also to critique the violences of elite postcolonial nationalisms.

*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* was released to both acclaim and controversy in 1987. This second collaboration between filmmaker Stephen Frears and screenwriter Hanif Kureishi (after their acclaimed 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette*) continues their engagement with the racial and sexual politics of Thatcher-era England.<sup>32</sup> Unlike *Laundrette*, whose narrative focused primarily on the queer romance between an upwardly mobile British Asian man and a working-class former member of the National Front, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* employs a much broader and in some ways less forgiving canvas. The world of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is populated by an array of characters from different racial, gender and class positions, offering a kind of cross-section of postcolonial London that, at least initially, refuses to privilege one character or narrative over another.<sup>33</sup> Sammy, a British Pakistani accountant, and Rosie, a white social worker, are a polyamorous married couple. Rosie enjoys the sexual freedom afforded by this arrangement, telling Sammy, "Freedom plus commitment. Those were our words. They were to be the pillars of our love and life together." Sammy also pursues other sexual partners, most notably Anna, a white American photographer, but his jealousy and insecurity often get the best of him. Sammy's father, Rafi Rahman, arrives in London from Pakistan. An anticolonial nationalist in his youth, Rafi studied in London before returning to the subcontinent to take a position in the postcolonial Pakistani government. He has returned now to London in order to escape persecution in Pakistan for political corruption and violence. In London he rekindles an affair with Alice, a white British woman with whom he had been in love while he was a student. While Rosie initially welcomes Rafi into their home, Sammy's resentment of his

father's desertion of him as a child weighs heavily on their relationship. Rafi befriends a young Black man named Danny, who eventually becomes Rosie's lover. Added to the mix are Rani and Vivia, a South Asian and Black lesbian couple who are close friends of Rosie's. Rani and Vivia work for a leftist political newspaper and uncover information about Rafi's involvement in the torture of political dissidents in Pakistan. Finally, in a turn to the supernatural, there is the unnamed ghostly taxi driver who we initially see driving Rafi from the airport. This ghost, a material manifestation of Rafi's torture victims, appears frequently in the background action in the second half of the film before ultimately seeking his revenge on Rafi, leading Rafi to commit suicide.

As the above description demonstrates, it is difficult to articulate a central plot line for the film. Instead, Frears and Kureishi explore the myriad encounters and relationships between the characters in order to engage an almost endless list of thematic concerns: the racial and class disposessions engendered by Thatcherism, the legacies of empire in London in the late twentieth century, the limits of liberal multiculturalism, police harassment and violence directed at British Black communities and communities of color, postcolonial state violence and torture, anticolonial and anti-imperial resistance, the dynamic articulation of postcolonial identities, and alternatives to normative heteropatriarchy, especially those embodied and practiced by diasporic queers of color. As Ranita Chatterjee suggests, the "complexity of representation" found in *Sammy and Rosie* stems from its displacement of white heterosexual masculinity: "The absence of the traditional white heterosexual male as implied center liberates the conceivable play of images on the screen, thus enabling a veritable explosion of difference."<sup>34</sup> Like Chatterjee, I am particularly interested in the political possibilities made available through the secondary characters of Danny, Rani and Vivia, and also the ghostly taxi driver. Collectively these characters not only point to modes of critique that shape the film's critical posture toward Sammy and Rosie's liberalism and Rafi's heteropatriarchal nationalism, but they also enable a reckoning with the legacies of colonial and postcolonial violence in late twentieth-century London, although as I note below that reckoning has significant limits.

From the start, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is invested in drawing continuities between the history of British colonialism and the position of working-class communities of color in London in the 1980s. The film opens with the image of a desolate urban wasteland under a highway overpass. Played over this image, which precedes the opening credits of the film, is the voice of Margaret Thatcher giving her victory address on the night of the 1987 election. "We have a great deal of work to do so no one must slack," she says to an audibly joyful, laughing audience, "You will have a marvelous party tonight, and you can clear up tomorrow. But on Monday, you know we've got a big job to do in some of those inner cities." This establishing shot of the barren overpass actually references the end of film after a community of unhoused people has been forcibly removed from the land in order for a property developer to build on it. After this brief opening scene and the main credits, we witness the brutal murder of an unnamed Black woman by the police while they search for her son.<sup>35</sup> In response to this murder, the working-class Black community erupts in a rebellion. Police in full riot gear are called in as fires rage outside Sammy and Rosie's apartment window on the day that Rafi arrives from Pakistan. In the pairing of these two opening scenes—one depicting the aftermath of the displacement of the urban poor in service of neoliberal capitalist development, the other powerfully representing the surveillance and susceptibility of diasporic Black working class communities to state-sanctioned violence and death—the film yokes together the intersecting structures of race, class, and gender as the terms of what Danny will later refer to as "domestic

colonialism," which he sees as the condition of working-class immigrant communities of color in London.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, the film is replete with signs of the colonial past reappearing in the postcolonial present: the "anticolonial stones" wielded by Rafi is his youth, which find their present day counterpart in the bricks thrown by participants of the rebellion; Alice's taste for Earl Grey tea and Jamaica rum cake, and her dusty childhood photos of herself with her Indian ayah; Danny's questions to Rafi—"You guys ended colonialism non-violently. You'd sit down all over the place, right?"—as he considers different resistance strategies. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is thus particularly attentive to the ways in which the lifespan of empire exceeds any notion of linear progress from the colonial to the postcolonial. Instead, as the above examples attest, the film ruminates on the ongoing, residual effects of colonial power relations in the racial and cultural formations of late-twentieth century Britain.<sup>37</sup> Danny is a particularly suggestive figure here, as he comes to embody a playful, queer critical posture toward these colonial remnants. Danny is a ubiquitous but subtle presence in the film, often seen in the background of the action. He is one of the first characters to whom the audience is introduced and functions as a familiar though somewhat elusive anchor for the audience as the film moves between its various storylines. When he meets Rafi for the first time, he introduces himself as Danny and quickly adds, "But people who like me call me Victoria," ironically and queerly invoking the monarch most associated with Britain's colonial expansion. Danny's Victoria persona is evoked again a few scenes later when he is introduced to Alice as he dons her lace and feather covered gardening hat which he finds discarded outside her suburban home. This invocation of Queen Victoria in the figure of Danny, a working-class Black British youth, simultaneously acknowledges, on the one hand, the imperial history that would bring Black and Asian laboring subjects to the colonial metropole in the post-war period, and on the other hand the mobilization of working-class communities of color in critically challenging and reimagining the very notion of British national identity in the decades after the formal end of empire.

If Danny/Victoria is suggestive of a queer challenge to the colonial history of Britain, Rani and Vivia, the interracial Black and South Asian lesbian activist couple, can be read as the figureheads of the film's queer diasporic engagement with the gendered violences of postcolonial nationalism as represented by Rafi.<sup>38</sup> While in their initial scenes it appears as if Rani and Vivia will simply be used to humorously undercut Rafi's discomfort with (queer) women's sexuality, it is soon revealed they are in fact the catalyst for the film's engagement with Rafi's overseeing of state torture programs in Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> When he first arrives in Sammy and Rosie's apartment, Rani takes Rosie aside to ask if she is aware of exactly who Rafi is and what his role was in the postcolonial Pakistani government. Rosie admits to not knowing much about Rafi's political career and Rani promises that she will "dig out some stuff about him." Later, we see Rani and Vivia at the offices of what seems to be a nonprofit organization, described in the screenplay as "rather like Amnesty."<sup>40</sup> An East Asian woman retrieves the multivolume file on Rafi and gives it to Rani and Vivia, who affectionately hold hands with each other at her desk. In this moment of queer intimacy in the Amnesty office and the collective uncovering of Rafi's crimes by three politicized women of color, we can observe the linking of Rani and Vivia's queer sexuality to their pursuit of information about Rafi's political career, a linkage which will come to fruition in Rani's brilliant final confrontation with Rafi towards the end of the film.

After spending the night with Alice, Rafi returns to Sammy and Rosie's apartment only to find Rani and Vivia in bed together. He and Rani exchange insults in Urdu and Punjabi as

she chases him first out the bedroom then the apartment. This is the only scene in the movie not performed in English and it is subtitled as follows:

RAFI: What are you doing? You perverted, half-sexed, God-accursed lesbians! God save my eyes from the sights I'm seeing!

RANI: Fuck off, you old bastard! I'll tin-opener off your foreskin! I'll shove live rats up your camel! Who the fuck do you think you are! Pigshit bastard! I'll crush his balls! Let me get at that withered sperm-factory!

As Rahul Gairola astutely argues, the "official" translation offered by the subtitles omits crucial content from Rani's curses, specifically her repeated references to Rafi as a "bloody criminal" and "bloody crook."<sup>41</sup> The inaccurate subtitling of the Urdu and Punjabi insults during this scene has led viewers (and some critics) to read this scene only as a comedic representation of Rani as a hysterical lesbian wielding a piece of wood with the intention of beating Rafi. Gairola complicates this reading when he writes:

While subtitled phrases like "perverted, half-sexed, God-accursed lesbians" and "I'll shove live rats up your camel" offer creative pejoratives that sound funny...they do a disservice to the political urgency of what is actually said in the Urdu exchange. The political significance of what would normally be a rather humorous scene is undermined by the elision of the accusation and repetition by Rani that Rafi is a "criminal."<sup>42</sup>

At this point in the film, Sammy and Rosie are fully aware of the extent of Rafi's crimes—Rani had indeed passed along the file about him. Rosie is outraged by what she learns but nonetheless proves to be ineffective in confronting Rafi. Her politics are ultimately, as Rani points out, "just surface...liberalism gone mad."<sup>43</sup>

The conflict between Rafi and Rani described above is remarkable as well because it directs the film into its final act, in which Rafi will be forced to come face to face with the literal ghosts of his past. On the street just after escaping Rani, Rafi notices an elderly South Asian man wearing an eye patch and a large bandage on his head staring at him. This man had been his taxi driver earlier in the film and as Rafi watches him pass the man evaporates into thin air. For the rest of the film this ghost follows Rafi everywhere he goes though no one else is able to see him. In introducing the ghost just after the confrontation in which Rani repeatedly calls Rafi a criminal, a link is made between Rani and the ghost, establishing a connection between these two figures who come to facilitate the film's full engagement with the violence upon which Rafi's nationalism rests. As Gayatri Spivak argues, Rani and Vivia form the basis of the film's turning away from realism through the introduction of the supernatural and the ghostly: "It's because of [Rani and Vivia's] fact-finding that the film can utilize...non-realistic techniques...[such as] the ghost figure. The film justifies its move away from realism, its stylistic transformation in terms of these two lesbians which I find quite interesting."<sup>44</sup> The linking of Rani and Vivia to the ghost can be read as a kind of queer affiliation.<sup>45</sup> While unable to see the ghostly presence, they have "made common cause" with the ghost, to use Avery Gordon's phrasing.<sup>46</sup> Neither intentional nor conscious on their part, this affiliation between Rani and Vivia and the ghost nonetheless enables the film, as Spivak suggests, to manipulate the stylistic conventions of realism, allowing the ghost to materialize, to speak, and ultimately to act on Rafi and the violent histories he carries with him.

The final encounter between Rafi and the ghost occurs in Danny's trailer, which is parked on the barren wasteland of the film's opening on the night before the eviction that will eventually displace the community of people who live there. Distraught over his failed love affair with Alice and the increasingly tense environment at Sammy and Rosie's apartment, Rafi is visibly agitated when the ghost appears in the dark caravan. The ghost is naked now and though his body is partially shrouded in shadow his figure reveals to the audience the extent of his injuries: his body is covered with bloody bruises and burns; his left eye is missing from its socket and he wears a metal headpiece used in electroconvulsive torture. He slowly begins to remove the electrodes stuck onto his body and places the electroconvulsive apparatus on Rafi's head. Rafi pleads for forgiveness and tries to justify his past crimes: "The country needed a sense of direction, of identity. People like you, organizing into unions, discouraged and disrupted all progress." As the embodiment of the elite postcolonial nationalism of the immediate post-independence moment, Rafi's dialogue is an almost perfect instantiation of what Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* called the "pitfalls of national consciousness," in which the authority of the departing colonial power is transferred to the elite nationalist bourgeoisie at the expense of poor, working-class, and marginalized peoples.<sup>47</sup> With the metal headpiece affixed to Rafi's head, the ghost begins to recede from view. The headpiece begins to glow with electricity. "All of human life you desecrated, Rafi Rahman!" yells the ghost, as Rafi screams in pain.

While this scene might be read as simply the final confrontation between two individual people—Rafi and the ghost of the tortured man—this scene has important social, rather than only individual import. While the physical manifestation of the ghost in the figure of the cab driver does indeed mark the film's explicit move into non-realist modes of representation, the haunting that the ghost literalizes has already been a "seething presence" in the film in the files of information about Rafi's involvement in torture.<sup>48</sup> The revelation of the contents of the files occurs earlier, as Rosie reads aloud to Sammy a testimonial transcribed from interviews with one of Rafi's victims. The testimony is utterly graphic in its depiction of sexual violation, drawing on the full repertoire of heteropatriarchal and homophobic anxieties about male submission, anal penetration and masculine vulnerability. Read alongside the earlier scenes of Rafi's discomfort with Rani and Vivia's sexuality, his investment in a heteronormative politics of reproduction and inheritance, his accusation that Rosie's resistance to having children makes her a "damned dyke," and Danny's queering of Queen Victoria, we can read the sexual as the primary terrain upon which *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* stakes its multivalent queer diasporic critique of postcolonial nationalism. In this sense, to read the literalization of the ghost and his final confrontation with Rafi simply as a matter of individual revenge would be to diminish the political stakes of this scene. Instead, following Avery Gordon, we can read the appearance and the agency of the ghost as evidence that he "is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure."<sup>49</sup> Thus, through Rani and Vivia's making common cause with the ghost, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* articulates a powerful queer diasporic critique of postcolonial nationalism and the persistence of colonial racial ideologies for South Asian migrants in Britain.

Yet, while the opening set-up of the film (again what Chatterjee calls "an explosion of difference") points to the possibility of a multivocal analysis of the racial, sexual, and class politics of the Thatcher era, the film ultimately privileges the subject positions of the South Asian characters over all others. As such, the film is much less effective in its depictions of both the specificity of white supremacist anti-Black violence that underlies the murder of the unnamed Black mother in the opening sequence as well as the ultimately rather flat characterization of Vivia. Although Rani and Vivia are initially positioned *together* as key

agents of the film's intersectional critique of British gendered racisms, in the final confrontation with Rafi before the arrival of the ghost only Rani emerges as the *singular* figure of critique. Vivia remains in the background, her image and her voice virtually drowned out by the Rani and Rafi's curses at each other. Moreover, as Ranita Chatterjee notes, the shift to subtitled Urdu and Punjabi in this scene (again, the only scene in the film not in English) actually redraws the lines of similarity and difference between Rafi, Rani and Vivia: "What begins as Rafi's desire to mark Rani and Vivia as different, if not deviant, because of their sexual difference gets displaced by Rafi's sameness with Rani and her difference from her lesbian love, Vivia."<sup>50</sup> Thus, we might observe in this scene the breakdown of the film's celebratory depiction of the figure of the "interracial Black-Asian lesbian couple" as the very sign of its radical intersectional politics. Unfortunately, the film offers little in the way of understanding the substance of either Rani and Vivia's politics beyond their critique of Rafi or the racial and sexual dynamics of their relationship itself. Rani's confrontation with Rafi is indeed the catalyst for the final return of the ghostly taxi driver intent on redressing the brutalities of Rafi's postcolonial nationalism, but attending to the film's displacement of Vivia in this scene (and ultimately the rest of the film) reveals how quickly the "Black" of political Blackness can be crowded out by the brown. While the taxi driver is the only literal ghost in the film, Vivia might actually be its most powerful figure of haunting. Vivia remains an absent presence that marks the film's tacit acknowledgement of Black women's social location in Thatcher-era England as well as the Black and Asian feminist solidarities discussed above but without the necessarily robust engagement with the complexities and contradictions therein. *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* asks that we follow multiple ghosts—the taxi driver and also Vivia—as they leads us "to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life," where the past and present collide in order to unsettle.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, the film loses sight of Vivia along the way.

## Conclusion

In my readings of *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, I have attempted to highlight the critical work of political Blackness for imagining models of queer feminist affiliation with the potential to disrupt dominant social orders and modes of representation. I cannot help but be moved by Maggie Baptiste's curatorial filmmaking practice, her experiments with form and memory in her queer montages of Black-Asian feminist solidarities. At the same time, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* lays bare the potential pitfalls of solidarities that fail to adequately address asymmetries of power between and among differently racialized and gendered formations.





We are no longer in a moment when an identitarian framing of political Blackness is useful or even desirable, but the project of constructing critical frameworks and analytics that can attend to the multiplicity of oppressive forces that structure our lives remains as urgent as ever. Luckily, there is a vibrant history and vast archive of transnational Black and women of color and queer of color work from which we might draw. In addition to the work of British feminists and queers cited throughout this essay, we might reflect on the continued relevance of Cathy Cohen's foundational call to "search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles."<sup>52</sup> Such a project might proceed from Lisa Lowe's visionary readings of the "intimacies of four continents" across colonial archives, histories and literatures.<sup>53</sup> It might look for what Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson call "strange affinities" grounded in difference that women of color and queer of color formations make legible as alternatives











to both dominant and minority nationalist framings of comparative racialization.<sup>54</sup> We might engage the genealogies of what Vanita Reddy and Anantha Sudhakar have called “feminist and queer Afro-Asian formations,” that disrupt the heteropatriarchal logics of dominant historiographic methods in Afro-Asian studies.<sup>55</sup> We might look to Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sharmin Hossain, who I cited at the very beginning of this essay, for models of how to link the violences of anti-Blackness, caste apartheid and settler colonialism; and also to the recent collaborations between Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective that have explored the differential workings of anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>56</sup> Finally, we might follow Maggie Baptiste whose queer curatorial practice, her passion for remembrance, pieces together subjugated histories of queer alliance to forge new kinds of relation in the present and for the future.

## Acknowledgements

Intellectual work is always a collective endeavor. I am lucky that so many wonderful and brilliant people have contributed to the thinking of this essay. I thank Lisa Lowe and Shelley Streeby always, for everything. Yumi Pak, Joo Ok Kim, and Victor Betts listened to my late night musings and offered invaluable feedback over email, text, phone, Zoom, and FaceTime. Much love. Thank you also to the editors and anonymous reviewers at *Lateral* for your generous feedback and to Women Make Movies for use of the still image from *The Passion of Remembrance*.

## Notes

1. Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sharmin Hossain, “South Asians for Black Lives: A Call for Action, Accountability and Introspection,” *Wear Your Voice Magazine*, June 3, 2020, <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/south-asians-for-black-lives-a-call-for-action/> < <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/south-asians-for-black-lives-a-call-for-action/>> . Equality Labs is an Ambedkarite South Asian progressive organization that works to combat caste apartheid, Islamophobia and white supremacy, <https://www.equalitylabs.org> < <https://www.equalitylabs.org/>> . 
2. See for example E. Tammy Kim, “The Perils of ‘People of Color,’” *New Yorker*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-activism/the-perils-of-people-of-color> < <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-activism/the-perils-of-people-of-color>> ; Shereen Marisol Meraji and Natalie Escobar, “Is it Time to Say R.I.P to ‘POC’?” *Code Switch*, NPR, September 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/918418825/is-it-time-to-say-r-i-p-to-p-o-c> < <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/918418825/is-it-time-to-say-r-i-p-to-p-o-c>> ; and Nora Fakim and Cecilia Macaulay, “‘Don’t Call Me BAME’: Why Some People are Rejecting the Term,” BBC News, June 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53194376> < <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53194376>> . 
3. Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 103, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2010), 48. Frank B. Wilderson III has written extensively about what he calls the “ruse of analogy.” See Wilderson’s *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, Duke Univ. Press, 2010) and his recent memoir *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020). See also Rinaldo Walcott, “The End of Diversity,” *Public Culture* 31, No. 2 (2019): 393–408. 
4. Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, ed. by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 2017), 94. 

5. Jafari S. Allen, "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture," *GLQ* 18, No. 2-3 (2012): 216. For more on the import of women of color feminisms for genealogies of queer of color critique see Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Michael Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited," in *Gay Latino Studies: A Reader*, eds. Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 19-45; Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999). 
6. *The Passion of Remembrance*, dir. Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien (1986, Sankofa Film and Video Collective), VHS; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, dir. Stephen Frears, screenplay by Hanif Kureishi (1987, Cinecom Films), VHS. 
7. Paul Gilroy's proposes an understanding of Blackness as a "multi-accentual sign" as a way to circumvent essentialist definitions. See Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of the Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain" in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993). 
8. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi. 
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "What We Can Learn From the Rise and Fall of 'Political Blackness,'" *New York Times*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/opinion/political-blackness-race.html> < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/opinion/political-blackness-race.html> > . See also Reni Eddo-Lodge, *About Race*, "Political Blackness," podcast audio, April 11, 2018, <https://www.aboutracepodcast.com/4-political-blackness> < <https://www.aboutracepodcast.com/4-political-blackness> > . 
10. For example see Pratibha Parmar, "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), which includes a beautiful interview conversation between Parmar and June Jordan. Parmar elaborated on transnational links between British and US Black feminisms in her film *A Place of Rage* (1991, Women Make Movies), which features extended interviews with Jordan, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker. See also Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain*, Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 212-235; and Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review* 17 (1984): 3-19. 
11. Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006). For foundational theorizations of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 7 (1991): 1241-1299; Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and the Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 261-70. 
12. Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 9. 
13. Julia Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organizations and the Politics of Transformation*. (London: Routledge, 1998); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. (London: Routledge, 1996); Nydia A. Swaby, "Disparate in Voice, Sympathetic in Direction: Gendered Political Blackness and the Politics of Solidarity," *Feminist Review* 108 (2014): 11-25; Heidi Safia Mirza, ed., *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997). 
14. Michelle Wright, although not writing only about the Black British context, has made a similar feminist critique of models of African diaspora studies defined through tropes of common history or culture. My suggestion that political Blackness is best understood as a critical discourse rather than an identity category is indebted to her significant work. See Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). 

15. Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams*, 116. [↗](#)
16. For a brilliant and influential discussion of the ways in which dominant conceptions of post-war British national identity were rooted in whiteness, see Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, in which he writes, "The politics of 'race' in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between 'race' and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect." Paul Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 45. [↗](#)
17. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley (New York: Routledge, 1996): 442; A. Sivanandan, Ashley Dawson and Claire Alexander each provide useful genealogies of the emergence of this kind of Black British politics. See A. Sivanandan, "From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain" in *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1991); Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007); and Claire Alexander, "Breaking Black: The Death of Ethnic and Racial Studies in Britain," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 6 (2018). [↗](#)
18. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 442. [↗](#)
19. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 442. For an influential analysis of the "burden of representation" placed on minoritized cultural producers see Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994). [↗](#)
20. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444. [↗](#)
21. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444. [↗](#)
22. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 445. [↗](#)
23. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 447. [↗](#)
24. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 448, emphasis in original. [↗](#)
25. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 88. For illuminating interviews with members of Sankofa and the Black Audio Film collective see Coco Fusco, *Young, British and Black: The Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective* (Buffalo: Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Center, 1988). [↗](#)
26. See Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*. [↗](#)
27. See Richard Fung, "Eyes on Black Britain: An Interview with Isaac Julien." *Fuse* 48 (Winter 1987/88): 25–28. [↗](#)
28. Kobena Mercer is quite critical of the Speaker's Drama in *The Passion of Remembrance*, arguing that these portions of the film are "profoundly monologic" rather than dialogic, homogenizing, and totalizing rather than differentiated; see Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 65. [↗](#)
29. Fung, "Eyes on Black Britain." [↗](#)
30. Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 4. [↗](#)
31. My thinking on queer memory here is indebted to Fatima El-Tayeb's beautiful theorization of queer memory discourses, which she argues are "not built on linear notions of roots and authentic origins, but on the grounding of a community embracing its 'inauthentic,' fractured nature rather than resolving it through a projected, unambiguous past." See Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011), 43–44. [↗](#)
32. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. Stephen Frears, screenplay by Hanif Kureishi (1985, Working Title Films), DVD. [↗](#)

33. Gayatri Spivak argues that this shift in focus from the individual within a political context to a more collective representation might constitute a pattern for postcolonial cultural producers. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "In Praise of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," *Critical Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1989): 80–88. [↗](#)
34. Ranita Chatterjee, "An Explosion of Difference: The Margins of Perception in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," in *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996): 172. [↗](#)
35. Both bell hooks and Rahul Gairola note that this scene was inspired by the real-life shooting of Dorothy "Cherry" Groce on September 28, 1985. Police raided Groce's Brixton home in search of her son. Groce was shot in the chest by police, leaving her permanently paralyzed from the waist down. See bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Rahul Gairola, "A Critique of Thatcherism and the Queering of Home in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," *South Asian Review* 32, no. 3 (2011): 123–137. [↗](#)
36. Salman Rushdie argues in *Imaginary Homelands* that the experiences of racialized, working-class immigrants in Britain are rooted in the long history of British colonialism: "In short, if we want to understand British racism...it's impossible to even begin to grasp the nature of the beast unless we accept its historical roots. Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told you were superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain." See Salman Rushdie, "The New Empire Within Britain" in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 130. [↗](#)
37. In its focus on the residues of colonialism, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* is an important rejoinder to what Rushdie refers to as the "Raj revival"—the elaborate, nostalgic period representations of empire that dominated British cinema and television at the time, such as Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, David Lean's adaptation of *A Passage to India* and the television production of Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. See Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*. [↗](#)
38. For more on queer diasporic critique, see Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). [↗](#)
39. This is not at all to undermine the fact that Rani has a rather scathing, critical wit. For instance, she describes heterosexual sex as "You know, that stuff when the woman spends the whole time trying to come, but can't. And the man spends the whole time trying to stop himself coming, but can't." This line is made all the more memorable and hilarious by the great Meera Syal's performance as Rani. [↗](#)
40. Hanif Kureishi, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid: The Screenplay and the Screenwriter's Diary* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 15. [↗](#)
41. Gairola, "A Critique of Thatcherism," 132. [↗](#)
42. Gairola, "A Critique of Thatcherism," 132. [↗](#)
43. As bell hooks notes, two scenes in particular illustrate the limits of Sammy and Rosie's liberalism. On the night of the rebellion, Sammy is reclined on his sofa with headphones blaring music that literally cut off the sound of the rebellion outside his window. He snorts a line of cocaine, takes a bite of his McDonald's hamburger and masturbates to a porn magazine in his lap. As hooks notes, he is more concerned with satisfying his desires than participating in the rebellion. Rosie also seems indifferent to the rebellion, as we see her walk seemingly unfazed past burning cars on the street on her way to meet an unnamed lover. See bell hooks, *Yearning*. [↗](#)
44. Spivak, "In Praise of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," 83. [↗](#)
45. As Yael Maurer observes about the juxtaposition of Rani's confrontation with Rafi and the manifestation of the taxi driver ghost, "One transgression, that of the heteronormative order which both Rafi and Thatcher's regime champion, is followed by another, the transgression inherent in the very act of unveiling the past as lurid and gruesome." See Yael Maurer, "'Not English but Londoners': Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*," *The London Literary Journal* 11, No. 1 (2014): 38. For more on queer affiliation see Hong and Ferguson's *Strange Affinities* and Gayatri Gopinath's *Unruly Visions*. [↗](#)
46. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22. [↗](#)

47. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004). [↗](#)
48. "Seething presence" is Avery Gordon's phrase used to describe the agency of haunting, even if that haunting has not (yet) materialized in the figure of the ghost. See *Ghostly Matters*, 8. [↗](#)
49. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8. [↗](#)
50. Chatterjee, "An Explosion of Difference," 177. [↗](#)
51. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8. [↗](#)
52. Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3, (1997): 437–465. [↗](#)
53. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). [↗](#)
54. Hong and Ferguson, *Strange Affinities*, 18. [↗](#)
55. Vanita Reddy and Anantha Sudhakar, "Introduction: Feminist and Queer Afro-Asian Formations," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 14.3 (2018). [↗](#)
56. Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sharmin Hossain, "South Asians for Black Lives"; Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective, "Black and Asian-American Feminist Solidarities: A Reading List," April 30, 2020, <https://www.blackwomenradicals.com/blog-feed/black-and-asian-feminist-solidarities-a-reading-list> <  
<https://www.blackwomenradicals.com/blog-feed/black-and-asian-feminist-solidarities-a-reading-list>> . [↗](#)
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## Review of *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* by Sara Ahmed (Duke University Press)

by Caroline Kinderthain | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** The last book in Ahmed's terminological trilogy, *What's the Use* investigates a term rooted in quotidian routine: *use*. Her previous books in this series, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), interrogate happiness and the will respectively. Following her resignation from Goldsmiths University, *What's the Use* highlights both the complexity of taking on use as a concrete project and the lasting effects of stopped university work. By leading the reader through an intellectual, philosophical, and educational history of "use," Ahmed attaches "use" and the human experience to diversity work in the university. With student and faculty complaints as her evidence, Ahmed provides heart-breaking, anxiety-inducing, enraging testimonials of systemic oppression, ignorance, and abuse in the university setting. *What's the Use* provides tangible practices for disrupting overused systemic oppression in a referential tome that can be used as both a study guide and a road map.

**KEYWORDS** higher education, queer, university

*What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* By Sara Ahmed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 296. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0650-3 (paperback). US List \$26.95.

The last book in Ahmed's terminological trilogy, *What's the Use* investigates a term rooted in quotidian routine: *use*. Her previous books in this series, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), interrogate *happiness* and *the will* respectively. Ahmed describes the process of writing these earlier texts as, "following words around, *in* and *out* of their intellectual histories." (31, my emphasis) *What's the Use* demands a different kind of process: not only is "use" the method, as in "using happiness" or "the use of the will," but it is also the subject, as in the thing that is used, thus leading this project to turn from "in and out" to "around and about." Ahmed also notes that an earlier approach to the same kind of archival work from her previous project would not fit here, and instead a "used archive" replaced a "useful" one for the research purposes of this book. (13) Situating "use" in past research around a present context is indicative of not only where this project will go, but how it came to be. While research for *Use* began in 2013 before *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed did not return to it until 2016, due to her involvement in "a series of inquiries into sexual harassment and sexual misconduct" that resulted in her resignation from Goldsmiths University. (12) According to Ahmed's personal website, her resignation was in retaliation to the university's "failure to deal with the problem of sexual harassment."<sup>1</sup> The distance between the start of her research and the first draft highlights both the complexity of taking on *use* as a concrete project and the lasting effects of stopped university work. By leading the reader through an intellectual, philosophical, and educational history of "use," Ahmed attaches "use" and the human experience to diversity work in the university.

In the first chapter, Ahmed explores objects and their “use status,” the way that objects travel through time in relation to how, when, and where they are used. (23) She identifies moments of “created use” in objects like a cup or a puddle, which establish an understanding that “use can come after” and does not have to reside in the present. A puddle becomes a drinking vessel only after Ahmed’s dog, Poppy, drinks from it. (23) In other words, an object’s usefulness does not rely on its potential to follow the purpose for which it was designed. Throughout the rest of this chapter, subject headings indicate the temporal journey of use: In Use, Used, Unused, Overused, Used Up, and Un/Usable. These headings signify the modes of use that Ahmed explores in reference to particular objects and serve as a chiasmic index for her final chapter, in which she fits moments of university work (and usually stopped university work) into these same categories.

University work consists of any function of a university that is challenged by normative narratives of operation. The fundamentals of university life—that students are able to learn and graduate in a safe environment—are only truly achievable if every individual of race, gender, orientation, and ability is able to ensure their own safety. Ahmed unfolds how students are stopped when modes of use are deemed unusable according to the infrastructure in place. Like this book’s title, Ahmed constantly asks questions of use assumptions: Who are use instructions intended for, with respect to social and political categories? (30) How does a public space become unusable? (31) What happens when we take something out of use for preservation? (33) To end chapter one, Ahmed introduces an image of a “well-worn path” from a British travel guide alongside a kind of use-paradox: “The more a path is used, the more a path is used.” (41) As a path is overused, it becomes solidified as the only possible path, thus making change and reformation difficult. In her later chapters, she will use “the path” as a relation of institutions, a formulation for utilitarianism and universal design, and a catalyst for potential queer use.

Ahmed reanimates the history of biology and the theory of life, allowing her to stabilize “use” in phenomena. (69) She provides the reader with an encyclopedic overview of both Jean Baptiste Lamarck’s and Charles Darwin’s notes on biological law and evolution, which include or identify particular moments of use. Ahmed puts Lamarck and Darwin in conversation with each other, as comparing the two “provides a particularly effective case study of the uses of use because the differences and similarities between them have already been framed in these terms.” (69) Her analysis furthers a question of what power, if any, environments can hold over usability, which is the fundamental point from which Darwin and Lamarck diverge. For Lamarck, the ever-changing nature of an environment demands dynamic changeability for humans. (72) Darwin recognizes this same changeability but credits it to innate biological natural selection. (80) Ahmed weaves these ‘use arguments’ together to challenge the tendency to view the fungibility of human nature as dependent on physical ability. If an environment demands certain modes of usability, like a giraffe’s long neck reaching tall tree leaves, how can individuals practice autonomy within certain factors deemed out of their control? To end the book’s second chapter, Ahmed draws from a Marxist critique of productivity, that commodified labor requires, “a history of exhaustion,” to contest eugenic conclusions of the “moral duty” of use. (95) Failing to live up to the expectation of exhaustion exposes how a person can be deemed useless by association to normative ability. (102)

In chapter three, Ahmed again stabilizes “use” by uncovering its core relation to utilitarianism, discipline, and education theory, including analysis of a range of writers that signal these interrelated fields like Foucault, Locke, Bentham, Bell, and Lancaster. Linking education philosophy to a conversation of use sounds like a simple task. However, Ahmed

resists the urge to remove a larger political conversation about citizen surveillance and disciplinary power from the utility of such philosophies. She introduces the early British pedagogy of monitorial schools, schools that operate with student monitors as the main disciplinarians. Such monitors would report back to the schoolmaster if fellow students were misbehaving or failing to be on task. Ahmed links monitorial policy together with positive affect as a technique of surveillance that pairs with the law of exercise—not only is a behavior rewarded for being repeated, but also for resulting in positive effects, in this case, not being reported by fellow class monitors. (120) She further frames monitorial and utilitarian pedagogy as leading children toward “useful ends.” To end chapter three, Ahmed examines the connection between life and death according to Bentham’s description of unemployment, in which not to work is to be dead. (136) A body’s use then can be politicized based on the societal demand that it lives or dies, which leads Ahmed to complicate our understanding of the “universal value” of utility (138).

Chapter four and the conclusion ignite the present temporality of use and the university. By calling back to the details, images, and theories from history mapping in the first part of the book, Ahmed seamlessly integrates the kinds of damaging use relations that are far from stuck in the past. Diversity work for Ahmed is a clear indicator of the embodiment of a system of education that rarely veers from the “well-used paths.” With student and faculty complaints as her evidence, Ahmed provides heart-breaking, anxiety-inducing, enraging testimonials of systemic oppression, ignorance, and abuse in the university setting. Objects’ use-statuses are complicated as doors become closed conversations, walls become policy enforcers, and cups of tea become hush agreements (180-9). Chapter four leads into the conclusion of “queer use,” using something as it was not intended to be used, as a tool for “dismantling projects here,” a “here” in which readers can feel like they might have a role in tackling these well-used systems with Ahmed, not just watching from afar. (196)

While students and scholars of queer theory, feminist theory, and literary critique may have already had this book on their reading lists, Ahmed’s approach to use is interdisciplinary and accessible, making its potential audience anyone who has connections within or adjacent to a university setting. *What’s the Use* provides tangible practices for disrupting overused systemic oppression in a referential tome that can be used as both a study guide and a road map.

## Notes

1. Sara Ahmed, “Bio,” personal website, accessed July 1, 2020, <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv> < <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv> > . 

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## Author Information

### Caroline Kinderthain

Caroline Kinderthain is a first-year master's student in English at Clemson University. Her research focuses on queer theory and queer of color critique,

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## Article details

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## Review of *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* by Tiffany Lethabo King (Duke University Press)

by Laura Goldblatt | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** In this ambitious first book, Tiffany Lethabo King disrupts what she sees as settler-colonial studies' tendency to privilege the settler/conquistador as the ethical subject of Western theory. To do so, she undertakes the urgent work of considering historical, ceremonial, imaginative, and theoretical ways that Native and Black studies intersect and overlap within the North American context. Drawing in particular upon Afro-pessimism (for instance Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, Alexander G. Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynter) as well as Native studies' refusal of sovereignty as a political, ethical, and material formation (Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, Jodi Byrd, and Andrea Smith), King joins the likes of Tiya Miles in seeing as insufficient any account of settler colonialism or Western humanism that does not consider how Black and Native epistemologies and histories intersect.

**KEYWORDS** Afropessimism, Black studies, Native studies, settler colonialism

*The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. By Tiffany Lethabo King. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 304 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4780-0636-7. US List: \$27.95.

In this ambitious first book, Tiffany Lethabo King disrupts what she sees as settler-colonial studies' tendency to privilege the settler/conquistador as the ethical subject of Western theory. To do so, she undertakes the urgent work of considering historical, ceremonial, imaginative, and theoretical ways that Native and Black studies intersect and overlap within the North American context. Drawing in particular upon the Afro-pessimist tradition (for instance Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, Alexander G. Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynter) as well as Native studies' refusal of sovereignty as a political, ethical, and material formation (Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, Jodi Byrd, and Andrea Smith), King joins the likes of Tiya Miles in seeing as insufficient any account of settler colonialism or Western humanism that does not consider how Black and Native epistemologies and histories intersect.

In a vast and multifaceted archive that ranges from the eighteenth century to 2015 and considers media including maps, film, novels, and sculpture, King demonstrates with each chapter how bridging the gap between Native and Black studies restores friction to the contemporary and historical landscape and unsettles conventional understandings of coalitional politics. Throughout the book, she uses the metaphor of the "shoal"—a

collection of sand or other debris that causes the tide to become shallow and thereby offset, delay, or otherwise disrupt the water's path—as a critical hermeneutic for her theoretical interventions. King argues that reading Black and Native studies, along with their attendant commitments, together “shoals” or slows the onward march of conquest and settler colonialism, shifting how the rise of Western humanism is narrated, for instance, or demonstrating how Black and Native studies share theoretical and historical commitments. Additionally, she notes that the shoal—as a formation that is neither quite land, nor water—serves as an example of how Native and Black studies can be brought together, challenging interpretations that cast Blackness and Indigeneity in the Americas as oppositions: the former as rootless and the latter as rooted.

Despite these commitments, King neither shies away from the violences of conquest and slavery, nor the ways that Black and Native groups have been pitted against each other. For instance, in her third chapter—which takes up the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)—King acknowledges that enslaved labor was often used to clear land and displace Native persons, just as some Native American tribes owned enslaved persons of African descent, and that the two groups remain wary of each other in certain circumstances. True to her guiding metaphor, King leverages these episodes as a kind of shoal, bending her analysis to consider how erotic alliances and desires can create novel, fugitive alliances and allow for unconventional or liberatory worldviews.

In a similar vein, by divulging details about her own identity as a Black woman born in the US, King makes visible the limitations stemming from her own positionality. For instance, in her fourth chapter, she discusses how Black and Native American erotics disfigure Victorian notions of romance. King also notes that her ability to see a Black protagonist's desire for her Native American lover as exciting and respectful stems in part from her vantage point as a Black woman. Rather than excusing or censoring her reaction, King uses the moment as an opportunity to trace how legacies of settler colonialism, slavery, and conquest have permeated the personal, lived experience of the characters in *Daughters of the Dust*, such that what appears to be lovemaking from one cultural perspective can feel like marginalization from another.

King organizes each chapter around a central event or cultural artifact. Following an introduction where she lays out her theoretical project and the limitations she finds with some of the fields that dominate the humanities and social sciences—namely queer and Marxian theory and white-dominated settler-colonial studies—the first chapter explores the vandalization of the Christopher Columbus statue on the Boston waterfront in 2015. The group or individual involved splashed the statue with red paint and inscribed “BLACK LIVES MATTER!” on the back of the pedestal, a move, which King explains, makes it seem as though the statue is covered with blood. King turns to the subsequent public response to the act (especially those subjects who expressed confusion over why Columbus was being connected with slavery) and to the statue itself to imbed white humanism within the context of conquest and slavery and to demonstrate the category's inability to contain Black and Native American subjectivity. The themes in this first chapter return in her fifth and final chapter where she connects “Revisiting Sycorax,” a sculpture by a Black Canadian artist and educator, to emergent ceremonies that create space for Black and Native American solidarities and coalitions.

Her second and third chapters discuss William Gerard de Brahm's eighteenth-century map of the coast of what is now South Carolina and Georgia, in particular the cartouche featuring enslaved laborers in the lower right-hand corner. Here, King argues that while the

cartouche was intended to cast white European Cartesian logic as rational and dominant, it instead documents the instability slave rebellions and Cherokee-controlled land posed to Cartesian order itself. In her following chapter, she makes fruitful use of an archival accident: based on how the map was folded and preserved, the cartouche has been doubled, its imprint hovering upside-down—a ghostly remnant of itself on the opposite side of the page. Citing this accident as a result of the porousness of the material, King transitions to the film *Daughters of the Dust* and the ways that indigo dye seeps through the pores of the family featured in the film, staining their hands and showing how their work exceeds the category of labor. The film returns in her penultimate chapter alongside a companion novel written following the film, and the novel *Cherokee Rose* in an analysis of Black and Native erotics.

King's book is an important participant in a small but growing scholarly movement seeking to understand and unravel the logics of settler colonialism and conquest by breaking down scholarly silos between groups that frequently interacted and interact. Moreover, what King has so well begun can be built on by other scholars. For example, King finds Marx's category of labor insufficient for her purposes. Her critique could provide an opening for scholars currently working in a Marxist tradition to reconsider the relationship of labor to settler colonialism and slavery. Were they to make the attempt, they would find *The Black Shoals* to be a useful resource. There are some missed opportunities, however. At times, King's various metaphors—the shoal, the pore, cartography, and so on—seem unrelated to each other or compete for attention. Further, the book sometimes treats certain fields as monolithic. For instance, in her critique of Marx's category of labor she refrains from quoting Marx or more recent Marxist scholars' work on labor, settler colonialism, or enslavement, making it unclear which aspects of the Marxian sense of labor she finds insufficient. The methods King has developed in *The Black Shoals* could be productively trained on this literature to advance the arguments so well begun here.

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### Laura Goldblatt

Laura Goldblatt is an assistant professor at the University of Virginia with a PhD in English Literature from same. Her peer-reviewed work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Mississippi Quarterly*, the *Journal of American Studies*, *Social Text*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, *Pedagogy*, and *Works and Days*, and an edited volume about the August 12th, 2017 violence in Charlottesville. She is currently at work on two monographs. The first explores the reception of state-sponsored reproductions of literary and popular texts about U.S. national expansion used for propagandistic purposes. Yet rather than focus on the formal features of the artifacts themselves, she examines their use value for groups dispossessed by the logic of late capitalism, such as Native and Black Americans, during the long twentieth century. Additionally, along with Professor of Anthropology Richard Handler, she is at writing on a monograph about twentieth-century U.S. postage stamps that takes moral circulation as its theme.

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## Review of *Iconoclasm: The Breaking and Making of Images* edited by Rachel F. Stapleton and Antonio Viselli (McGill-Queen University Press)

by Charles Athanasopoulos | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Using an eclectic mix of artifacts (e.g. romance novels, historical sites, religious texts, literary texts), *Iconoclasm* highlights the cyclical nature of iconoclastic gestures and iconolatry. For the authors in this edited collection, iconoclasts re-energize iconophiles' investments in a particular object through its shattering. In taking a Nietzschean perspective on destruction, they also gesture toward the ways in which iconoclastic acts contain the seeds of a new form of idol worship. Highlighting what they call the "Taussigian principle," this text compels the reader to consider whether iconoclasm unwittingly reproduces the dialectical relationships it attempts to escape.

**KEYWORDS** culture, Frantz Fanon, Nietzsche, religion

*Iconoclasm: The Breaking and Making of Images*. Edited by Rachel F. Stapleton and Antonio Viselli. Montreal & Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen University Press, 2019. Pp. 215. (paper) ISBN 780773557376

Rachel F. Stapleton and Antonio Viselli's edited collection of essays takes readers on a journey through various examples of iconoclasm and its relationship to the creation and/or veneration of icons. In the introduction, they explain that the common thread between this eclectic mix of essays is the way each author highlights the reciprocal nature of iconolatry and iconoclasm. Put another way, *Iconoclasm* builds on the scholarly works of Michael Taussig, WJT Mitchell, and Bruno Latour, all three of whom who have attempted to demonstrate how "the act of destroying the sacred unintentionally bestows iconic status on the desecrated object" and how an obsession with transgression itself becomes a new form of idol worship (1). For them, the iconoclastic gesture also contains the seeds of creation, producing new images out of the ruins of what they have shattered. Thus, the utility of this text is not limited to religious scholars but more broadly to those also interested in the relationship between the breaking and making of institutions, philosophies, and dogmas.

In chapter one, Michael Taussig declares "Iconoclasm is written into the icon. Taboos are meant to be broken" (22). Taussig offers the example of the obelisk that exists in France at the Place of Concord: each act of iconoclasm that unfolds at this site—the beheading of French monarch Louis XVI, the theft of Egyptian monarchical icons for European government, the de-facing of the obelisk with a pink condom by ACT UP—ultimately served to make this iconic site relevant in new ways (29). Indeed, Taussig performatively

demonstrates many of the claims made in the outset of the book through this keen example.

After framing the major argument of the book in the introduction and Michael Taussig's "Iconoclasm Dictionary" in chapter one, Stapleton and Viselli organize this edited collection of essays according to major keywords that are inextricable from the operation of icons. The keywords that organize the book are "religion," "pop art," "nation," and "sexy," and each thematic section opens with a brief definition of the keyword and its importance to the overall project. Then, each keyword is followed by two chapters that wrestle with that concept as it relates to icons.

In chapter two, Christopher Van Ginhoven Rey theorizes iconoclasm through "religion" by meditating on how the shattering of Christ's physical form pushes his followers toward his spirit, faith, and the creation of a larger Christian social body (43). Following this, Beth Saunders pushes readers to consider photography itself as a kind of religious ritual centered on producing icons in which the polaroid becomes an object of devotion through a discussion of Marian apparitions (76).

The next keyword "pop art" is introduced by Natalie Pendergast's comic book-style representation of an attempt at defining the term. In the fourth chapter, Emily Hoffman centers Paul Newman, an actor known for playing anti-hero characters and for being anti-celebrity culture. Hoffman cleverly highlights how Newman's rejection of popular culture became a unique branding technique that paradoxically increased his iconic status (85). In chapter five, Brendon Wocke uses the artist Banksy as an example of how the everyday person can become an iconoclast through the use of their freedom of expression in the fifth chapter. However, Wocke argues that Banksy's queering of images of England's Queen Elizabeth works to re-energize investment in the Crown and makes the artist himself paradoxically iconic because of his iconoclastic gestures (115-116).

Shifting to a consideration of "nation," T. Shotzko's chapter six examines how shows like *Mad Men* create advertisements for their show by riffing on the symbolic images of people falling from buildings during the terrorist attacks on 9/11 (130). For these producers, their symbolic adaptations of those images represent the fall of Western "man" while also suggesting that the show is meant to show us western man's ability to find his place again through the story of Don Draper. In the seventh chapter, Adam Swann reads Milton's *History of Britain* through the lens of what Taussig calls Nietzschean iconoclasm. Swann argues that Milton's text, much like Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, highlights the cyclical nature of history and thinks of destruction as a creative process that can rid us of the idols of nationalism in favor of something beyond like the over-Man. (148-149).

Centering the final keyword "sexy" in chapter eight, Angela Toscano describes romance novels as shattering realism through the creation of clichés that offer us a happily-ever-after. Thus, we move away from reality toward a veneration of these new mythic/iconic conceptions (188). The final chapter in the edited collection, written by Helen Hester, argues that pornography as a genre is not simply driven by an interest in genitalia but a broader interest in the desecration of other cultural forms.

This collection is an important contribution to the field of cultural studies because of the way it implicates iconoclastic gestures within systems of power against the notion that iconoclasm is synonymous with liberation. The line between icon creation and destruction becomes increasingly muddled as we traverse these various themes (religion, pop art, nation, sexy), calling into question what you thought you knew about icons. If anything

could further strengthen this text, perhaps it would be a discussion of iconoclasm in context of the toppling of racist monuments and abolitionist rhetoric(s) more broadly. Despite this, I believe that this book can be read in tandem with growing literature at the intersection of iconoclasm, anti-Blackness, multiculturalism, liberal sovereignty, and more. For example, how might Hester's analysis concerning the vampirism of pornography relate to debates amongst Black feminist scholars concerning the nuances of Black women's experiences in the industry and the relationship between desecration, shame, and Blackness? How might we extend Shatzko's argument concerning the fear of Western man's fall to consider the anxieties of the white middle-class that drives the "Make America Great Again" movement? In particular, I wonder what it would look like to put this text in conversation with scholarship in Black studies that is concerned with how iconoclastic gestures such as the shattering the Black Codes of the Jim Crow era is only replaced with new violent policies in a neoliberal era. If Taussig demonstrates how the line between tearing down an icon and building a new one has become blurred, then one might apply this logic to argue that the iconoclastic civil rights/Black power movements of the mid-to-late 1960s has resulted in the erasure of anti-Black violence through the worship of new iconic legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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Charles Athanasopoulos is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests include Black rhetorical studies, Fanonian thought, the Black Lives Matter movement, racial iconography, and media studies.

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## Review of *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* by Onno Oerlemans (Columbia University Press)

by Anne Llewellyn Morgan | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Onno Oerlemans's *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* offers a wide-ranging exploration of the different ways animals figure in poetry. Grounded in close readings of selected poems, the book considers in turn poetry that treats animals as allegorical figures, symbols of nature, representatives of a species, and individual beings. Oerlemans argues that reading poetry about animals models how to cultivate careful attention to the natural world. He also argues that poetry can complicate the divide between humans and other animals. The book is recommended for scholars embarking on animal studies projects and for use in the classroom.

**KEYWORDS** literary studies

*Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human*. By Onno Oerlemans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 238 (hardback). ISBN 9780231159548. US List: \$60.00.

There have been many books analyzing the role of animals in literature over the past decade, but Onno Oerlemans's *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* manages to offer something new. Oerlemans argues that poetry is uniquely suited to contemplating and reevaluating the relationship between humans and other animals, opening avenues of thought unavailable to either science or philosophy. He considers poems from different eras and genres but concentrates on poetry written in English. Although *Poetry and Animals* is grounded in theoretical work on critical animal studies, the real strength of the book is Oerlemans's close reading of poems, a practice which cultivates the kind of sustained attention and care that is also the basis of an ethical relationship with the natural world.

The first chapter, "The Animal in Allegory: From Chaucer to Gray," critiques the way fables represent animals, primarily as symbols of human vice and virtue. Rather than using pre-Romantic allegorical poetry as a foil for later realistic depictions of animals, Oerlemans showcases examples that suggest good poets have always seen complexity in the boundaries between humans and animals. "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Geoffrey Chaucer's fable about a rooster in *The Canterbury Tales*, plays with allegorical conventions by frequently reminding the reader of the protagonist's rooster-ness, particularly in vivid descriptions of his feathers and mating behavior. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is an important poem, Oerlemans argues, because "it does so much to draw attention to the animality of its characters and to connect its allegorical meanings to the unstable divide between

human and animal" (36). He reserves opprobrium for a later poem, calling Thomas Gray's "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat," a mock-tragic poem from the eighteenth century, "one of the cruelest animal fables I have encountered" (48). Oerlemans's disapproval stems not from choice of subject matter—a cat drowning in a goldfish vase—but from the way the cat's death is misogynistically allegorized as punishment for female vanity. Close reading and attention to animals can produce refreshing moral clarity.

In the second chapter, "Poems of the Animal," Oerlemans considers poetry that addresses the idea of animality. He argues that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is less interested in the unlucky albatross either as an individual or species than in the mariner's killing of it as "an act of malice on a representative of the animal world" (57). Coleridge's poem is also a kind of allegory that uses animals to posit a moral about human virtue, but specifically virtuous relations with others, including other species: "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast." Poems of the animal "reflect our need for a kind of respite from our increasingly urbanized, denaturalized, and environmentally threatened culture" (73). Poetry helps us heal our broken relationship with the natural world.

Oerlemans's third chapter, "Poetry as a Field Guide," turns to poems that focus on a species. Examples of this poetic genus include Emily Dickinson's "You'll know Her—by Her Foot," which is a sort of riddle designed for readers to recognize a bird they probably already know: the American robin. He also examines Marianne Moore's poems "The Jerboa" and "The Pangolin," poems that introduce readers to more obscure creatures. By thinking about these poems dedicated to particular species, Oerlemans resists the impulse of critical thought to reject taxonomies. Instead, Oerlemans builds on work by environmental thinkers such as Aldo Leopold who believe "names and naming are also an essential part of an environmental ethic" (85). As the title of the chapter suggests, there is some similarity between these poetic projects and birdwatching. One of John Clare's bird poems, for instance, teaches the reader how to differentiate a blackcap from a nightingale, which makes a similar song. Oerlemans suggests that "poetry foregrounds the pleasure and power of this act of naming" (87).

The fourth chapter examines "The Individual Animal in Poetry." Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "The Moose," for example, is not about moose as a species but a particular moose whose large presence stops a bus filled with delighted passengers: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?" Lyric poetry frequently memorializes encounters, and this chapter argues there is an ethical dimension to how we experience and remember encounters with animals. Bishop's poem and others like it suggest that "each encounter is a powerful confirmation of the idea that there may be happiness when we peacefully meet the gaze, and address the existence of, another individual creature" (138). These poems, many of them about pets, consider the unique subjectivities of non-human animals. What poetry offers in place of philosophical thought or ethical deliberation is a deep and continuous attention to the individual animal, a focus that reveals both the similarities and important differences between humans and other species.

In the final chapter, "Of Hybridity and the Hybrid," Oerlemans most directly engages with poems that, as the subtitle of the book promises, blur boundaries with the human. Oerlemans argues that poetry can transcend distinctions between human and animal imposed by science and philosophy. He presents Les Murray's "Bat's Ultrasound" as a poetic response to the philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous essay, "What it's Like to Be a Bat." Nagel suggests humans can never truly know what it's like to be a bat, but Murray's

poem gives it an honest try, crafting nonsense syllables representing the soundscape of bats' high-pitched echolocation. The poem's references to a human musical scale, however, actually seem to prove Nagel's thesis that we can only know what it would be like for a human to be a bat, not what it's like for a bat to be a bat. Nagel and Oerlemans would probably agree, though, that no one can understand what it's like to be a bat just by learning scientific facts about them. As Oerlemans argues earlier in his book, poetry's definitions of animals "are frequently informed by science but do vastly different work" (25). *Poetry and Animals* argues poetic imagination can take us further in understanding animals than science alone.

Because of its breadth, *Poetry and Animals* is a good resource for someone starting on a more specialized project in animal studies and poetry—such as birds in nineteenth-century lyric—to get a sense of potential analogous works from different historical periods. Its clear prose and methods of close reading also make it highly suitable for the classroom as a model of how to honestly and generously encounter both poetry and animals.

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Anne Llewellyn Morgan is an Instructor in the Department of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She holds a doctoral degree from the University of Virginia. She works on the relationship between poetry and natural philosophy in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

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## Review of *Inside the Critics' Circle* by Phillipa K Chong (Princeton University Press)

by Nikoleta Zampaki | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Phillipa K. Chong's *Inside the Critics' Circle* highlights the importance of book reviews, from how they are assigned and written to critics' thoughts about who they should listen to during the review process.

**KEYWORDS** academic, scholarship

*Inside the Critics' Circle*. By Phillipa K. Chong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, 192 pp. (hardback) ISBN: 9780691167466. US List: \$29.95.

Phillipa Chong's *Inside the Critics' Circle* explores the ways in which critics evaluate books through their own subjectivities as well as the ambiguities or uncertainties that reviewers have to face and/or overcome in their work. Chong draws on interviews she conducted with reviewers from *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*, and she delves into the complex nature of reviewing, including the cultural and ideological criteria involved as well the various factors that shape the critic's identity.

Book reviewing today is an academic or professional practice of evaluation, and Chong's aim is to reveal how critics have responded to a huge transition in their literary value and professional ethics in the name of commercialization. The author explores how critics are paired with review assignments, while highlighting how reviews can be transformed into products when these evaluations are sold or otherwise employed by publishers. Chong also addresses critics' fears, anxiety and stresses that emerge from writing a negative review, especially as they consider the perceived impact that such a review may have to the book and an author's reputation.

Chong's book is divided into three parts. In part one, Chong examines the ethics of the book reviewing, including how a potential reviewer undertakes the task of reviewing or evaluating a work. To investigate these topics, Chong conducted in-depth interviews with the above three American newspapers, and given such an "elite sample" (12-13), the study is quite impressive.

Chong also introduces here her concept of "epistemic uncertainty" (19) as a way of describing how the evaluation of fictional works entails engaging with uncertain, but knowable, ideas. Epistemic is relative with the knowledge since there are figures for the evaluation of fictions. Following the introductory chapter, Chong elaborates upon the logistics of how books are reviewed. Specifically, she distills four key topics that impact

reviewers: newsworthiness, interesting content, variety of coverage, and practical constraints (i.e., reviewer availability). In her third chapter, Chong grapples with the adage that there is “no accounting for taste,” (36), explaining that while many reviewers seek to produce a highly contextualized evaluation, there most often emerges a “critical consensus” (37).

In the second part of her book, Chong emphasizes that the reviewers’ judgements are subjective (chaotic, random, empirical etc.) and strategic; they employ aesthetic evaluation to reproduce their own status by advancing certain standards of a “good” literary production. Chong’s fourth chapter illustrates ways that critics make sense of navigating the social uncertainty of their reviews.

In her book’s final section, Chong examines the growing institutional uncertainties over the profile of a critic, even going so far as to ask questions about the existential necessity of reviewers today. Critics’ statements like “I like reading books” or “I like thinking about books” (109) reflect their own personal views on why they engage in reviewing. Chong ends her book discussing newspaper headlines like “*Death of the Critic*” (118) that indicate a current interest in deconstructing the review practice.

Moreover, Chong ultimately argues for two modes of reviewing: civilian and critical (37). In the civilian mode, reviewers are concerned with assessing the quality of a book based on instinctual responses; reviewers ask themselves whether they like a work based on their preferences. The critical mode of reviewing reflexively accounts for the first impressions of a book and then bases evaluation on specific observations of the text itself. Chong lays out a set of evaluative criteria in terms of participants’ perception in critical mode: characterization, language and prose, plot and structure, themes and ideas, and finally genre expectations. The forementioned set of criteria is evaluative in terms of the contributors’ perception of the fictions’ content. Based on these criteria Chong contains tables and figures percentages. In conclusion, Chong argues that it is:

“[critics’] personal experience as writers [and reviewees], shared stories about the other reviewers’ experiences, reflections on the status hierarchy in publishing, and the particular publication in which the review will appear that informs their individuals calculus about how they handle writing negative reviews” (p. 135).

Chong’s book brings a successful and well-argued analysis to the concise scope and structure of her project. She provides illuminating accounts of the reviewing process and points out familiar types of uncertainty that reviewers face when they write a review.

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Nikoleta Zampaki is a PhD candidate in Modern Greek Philology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece. She has also attended courses at the Harvard Extension School, Stanford University, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, and Pacifica Graduate Institute. Her research areas are Modern Greek, European and American poetry (nineteenth and

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## Review of *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music* by Jeffrey Nealon (University of Nebraska Press)

by David Arditi | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else*, Nealon is not like everybody else (i.e., a popoptimist), but rather dissects the position of popular music in American society and culture in the present moment. The title of the book comes from a performance by Ray Davies (former singer for the Kinks) at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in 2006. In a YouTube video of the performance, Nealon notes that when "the song's titling chorus returns, the hipster 'Keep Austin Weird' audience is shown, all in unison, chanting 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else.'" (68) It is in this example that he sees "the mass individuality logic of biopolitics in one concise screenshot: I'm ironically just like everybody else in and through my axiomatic self-assurance that I'm not like everybody else." (68) This passage perfectly sums up Nealon's thesis: through a capitalism that aims to make everyone a mass individual, people reaffirm their identity "not" being like everyone else, while at the same time failing to produce their identity positively.

**KEYWORDS** authenticity, biopolitics, capitalism, counterculture, culture, music, neoliberalism

Nealon, Jeffrey T. *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*. Provocations. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018, 144 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4962-0865-1. US List: \$28.

Books on popular music often degenerate into celebrations of popular music that reify artists such as Elvis Presley as "high" culture heroes, a practice Jeffrey Nealon terms "popoptimism." In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else*, Nealon is not like everybody else (i.e., a popoptimist), but rather dissects the position of popular music in American society and culture in the present moment. Nealon's book is part of the Provocations Series published by the University of Nebraska Press. As such, Nealon makes two provocative points to start the book. First, he takes Lawrence Grossberg's contention that the cultural study of popular music has been rather stagnant, and Nealon intends to "do something about" this. Second, Nealon calls for popular music to be taken seriously as a site of artistic production that has a wide-ranging impact on America's society and soul. This is a book that provokes thought about our discourse on popular music, and as such is a must read because Nealon reconfigures the terms of debate. However, in the tradition of the Provocations Book Series, I would like to further these provocations because I consider myself provoked.

The title of the book comes from a performance by Ray Davies (former singer for the Kinks) at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in 2006. In a YouTube video of the

performance, Nealon notes that when "the song's titling chorus returns, the hipster 'Keep Austin Weird' audience is shown, all in unison, chanting 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else.'" (68) It is in this example that he sees "the mass individuality logic of biopolitics in one concise screenshot: I'm ironically just like everybody else in and through my axiomatic self-assurance that I'm *not* like everybody else." (68) This passage perfectly sums up Nealon's thesis: through a capitalism that aims to make everyone a mass individual, people reaffirm their identity "not" being like everyone else, while at the same time failing to produce their identity positively. For me, this point reverberates post-modernist play with pastiche while being firmly embedded in the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture. Here is where our analysis differs.

For Nealon, following Grossberg, the concept "excorporation" defines the rock fan aesthetic as a way of "saying 'no' to some very specific things" rather than saying "yes." (55) As with the observation of Davies' concert, a strong strain of excorporation exists within rock music, especially punk (and post-punk grunge) that one is supposed to be against "the man" in an abstract way. However, Nealon contends that the excorporation contained within rock music becomes hollow when people chant that they are "not" like everybody else or they buy products to identify as resistant to mainstream culture. Personally, I picture Dr. Pepper's "One of a Kind" commercial from 2012. In this commercial, everyone becomes an individual through the consumption of Dr. Pepper, even the "Rebel" who dons a black t-shirt and walks the opposite direction from everyone else. Ironically, I teach this rejection to my popular culture students as part of a unit on the Frankfurt School to demonstrate the concept of pseudo-individualization. Nealon argues that excorporation becomes a marker one can consume in a biopolitical society that reaffirms neoliberal consumption.




While I agree with Nealon's contention that excorporation becomes a (maybe the) marker of neoliberal consumption, I was struck throughout with the timing of this move to consume excorporation. At many times throughout the book, I caught myself thinking, "yes, if this was the 1990s." Speaking with students, I walk away with the feeling that excorporation and authenticity claims (another theme of the book) no longer matter to younger popular culture consumers. Nealon leaves the reader in this strange feeling of datedness until chapter seven where he discusses the way people consume streaming playlists and Pandora stations largely through moods (something developed first by Beats Music<sup>1</sup>). The problem is that these means of consumption do not allow one to consume through an affirmation of authenticity or saying "no" to the mainstream, but rather as a way of firmly embracing the mainstream.<sup>2</sup> I think Nealon would agree with me, but there is a degree of ambiguity in the book as he often conflates the late twentieth century with the early twenty-first century. In this way, Nealon's argument lends itself to a popoptimist approach as he excorporates certain artists and genres by repeatedly reifying particular music (especially classic punk rock) while excoriating other music (he is not a fan of Steely Dan). As someone who never understood punk music, the reification of punk and classic '70s rock (ex. Pink Floyd) struck me as no different from those who celebrate Elvis Presley.

Our main difference stems from our periodization of capitalism and society. The main argument of the book is that the present moment represents a biopolitical society different from the disciplinary society of the Fordist-era. However, the current moment seems more of an intensification of earlier logics. Again, we agree in many ways. Ben Agger uses the term "fast capitalism" to describe in the current moment of capitalism an economic system in which capital (especially in the Culture Industry) produces so many commodities that we do not have time to consume (i.e. use) what we buy.<sup>3</sup> For Agger, we produce more

books (especially in academia) than anyone can read; for Nealon, we produce so much music that “few people are listening intently to music.” (144) These views resemble each other, but political stakes rest in their differences. If we still live in a disciplinary society, we can push back at our institutions and demand change; however, the biopolitical society, as described by Nealon, lends itself to the apolitical—something that resists change.

Unlike many popular music texts today, Nealon does not become distracted by reaffirming musicians or their fans. In many ways, the text resembles Jacques Attali’s *Noise* in its search for an original theoretical approach to popular music in our everyday lives. Nealon’s argument is provocative and worth a read.

## Notes

1. David Arditi, “Digital Subscriptions: The Unending Consumption of Music in the Digital Era,” *Popular Music and Society* 41, no. 3 (2018): 302–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.126410> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.126410>> . 
2. Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, “Hearing the Contradictions: Aesthetic Experience, Music and Digitization,” *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 3 (2018): 289–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518776517> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518776517>> . 
3. Ben Agger, *Fast Capitalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988). 

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## Author Information

### David Arditi

David Arditi is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Theory at the University of Texas at Arlington. His research addresses the impact of digital technology on society and culture with a specific focus on music. Arditi is author of *iTake-Over: The Recording Industry* in the digital era and his essays have appeared in *Critical Sociology*, *Popular Music & Society*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Civilisations*, *Media Fields Journal* and several edited volumes. He also serves as Editor of *Fast Capitalism*.

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## Review of *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* by Marisol LeBrón (University of California Press)

by Angel Rodriguez Rivera | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Using a multifaceted and transdisciplinary approach, Marisol LeBrón analyzes the development of punitive governance in Puerto Rico. LeBrón's approach pays particular attention to how capitalist colonial settings in Puerto Rico lead to the categorization of racialized, gendered, and classed populations as problematic subjects who then become the target of state violence as public policy. Intertwined with the state and its legitimacy, the book also looks at how these populations resist repressive policies and affect social relations of power on the island.

**KEYWORDS** colonial, police, police brutality, Puerto Rico, race, resistance, violence

*Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence and Resistance in Puerto Rico*. By Marisol LeBrón. Oakland, California: California University Press, 2019, pp. 320. ISBN 9780520300170 (paperback). US List \$29.95.

Marisol LeBrón's *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* is an examination of the relation between the intersectionality of race, poverty, gender, and the state in managing the "crime problem" in the colonial setting of Puerto Rico. The book describes how punitive measures established by the government of Puerto Rico are confronted with resistance from targeted populations labeled as criminal,<sup>1</sup> creating an interesting play of power relations on the island. As an unintended consequence, the book is a great account of how the state in a postindustrial, post-Fordist<sup>2</sup> setting loses legitimacy and struggles—through repressive and punitive measures—to maintain power and control over subaltern populations.

The point of departure for the book is the establishment of "punitive governance" as public policy during the early part of the 1990s in Puerto Rico. Punitive governance refers to "ways in which the Puerto Rican state has reasserted itself in the lives of Puerto Ricans through technologies of punishment such as policing, incarceration, as well as the violence (state sanctioned or other) they often provoke" (13). The book argues that this policy is the result of an unequal distribution of life chances and resources on the island.

Punitive governance in Puerto Rico develops as part of the ongoing colonization process led by "technocrats and colonial elites." This process defines and labels criminal populations as those that occupy the societal margins. Instead of a monolithic view of the margins, LeBrón argues that these surplus populations are diversely racialized, gendered,

and classed. The intersectionality of these social elements creates different forms of resistance to the colonial state apparatus and the colonial capitalist relations that it entails.

LeBrón's background in "Latinx studies, Black studies, carceral studies, feminist studies, queer studies, and critical ethnic studies" (18) serves to address the complex relations of oppression and exploitation within Puerto Rico. Furthermore, LeBrón investigates the highly secretive and prejudiced institution of the Puerto Rico Police Department, making her work a political statement in and of itself.

*Policing Life and Death* uses a transdisciplinary approach to understanding the processes through which Puerto Ricans negotiate power relations within the context of an ongoing political and economic crisis. The process relates to both the hegemonic powers personified in state institutions like the Puerto Rico Police Department and social groups that resist punitive governance. This demands a very sophisticated approach to gathering information. LeBrón uses media accounts of different events, cultural texts, government documents, and in-depth interviews with both state agents and racialized, gendered, and classed actors who participate in resistance processes on the island.

The book begins with an in-depth historical analysis and explanation of how Puerto Rico has developed as a colony of the United States. The ongoing colonial history of the island serves as the underlining condition that permeates the rest of the book, the condition that led to the formation of current social groups and conditions on the island. In chapter one, LeBrón shows how the colonial state in Puerto Rico and its "mano dura" policies defined racialized communities as surplus populations—and as deserving of the proliferation of violence against and within these communities. The second chapter discusses how the colonial elites on the island moved from a Cold War model focused on the island's strategic importance, to a new strategy of punitive governance. This new strategy became a re-signification of the importance of Puerto Rico as a colony.

In chapters three and four, LeBrón develops the topic of how criminalization evolved in the island, formed through race, gender and class, and the state's response to it. Chapter three presents an understanding of how processes of racialization and gendering relate to the criminalization of cultural patterns in Puerto Rico. For example, the definition of certain musical forms as criminal becomes an ideological tool of a material repressive policy. Chapter four deals with how the early 1990s punitive governance policy became the paradigm for understanding crime, violence, and the state's "war" against them. Chapter five's main example is the way in which state violence against protesters was framed in the same manner as violence against poor communities on the island. In the process, punitive governance policies allowed the state to maintain control over protests that question the state's legitimacy.

Chapters six and seven move to other ways that Puerto Ricans, both on the island and in the diaspora, have resisted punitive and repressive policies targeting certain populations in Puerto Rico. The process of resisting has used social media as well as community organizing strategies. The final chapter establishes how punitive governance has been a strategy based on prejudice and the labeling of disadvantaged populations on the island on the basis of class, race, and gender.

*Policing Life and Death* does a great job of looking at the intricacies of capitalist colonial responses to the "crime problem" in Puerto Rico. It intertwines a variety of social variables in the relations of power that shape these policies and the processes that resist them. It is

methodologically rigorous and theoretically sophisticated. Its analysis goes beyond the obvious and pays attention to a multifaceted set of criteria. A great development of this work could be a more in-depth analysis of how race and racial relations are formed and conceived on the island. Racialized populations and racialized social relations are constant topics in this book, however, a further exploration of racial definitions and how they are developed, defined, and redefined and its connection with crime and criminalization in Puerto Rico would be an important contribution to the rising scholarship of race and racism in Puerto Rico.

*Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* is an excellent analysis of the colonial state response to "crime." In particular, the book's framing of the issues, its solid research methodology, and diversity of approaches to the analysis of crime, policy responses, and resistances, makes for a great critique of the legitimacy and role of the state in contemporary social relations.

## Notes

1. Joel Villa-Rodríguez and Gary Gutiérrez-Renta, *Criminología Crítica y Aplicada* (San Juan: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013). [↗](#)
2. Angel Rodríguez-Rivera, "Acumulación, Estado, y Sociedad Civil: Mitos y Contradicciones de un Nuevo Contrato Social" in Rodríguez-Ramos. (ed.) *La Invariable Crisis* (San Juan: Publicaciones Gaviota, 2020): 55–74. [↗](#)

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## Author Information

### Angel Rodriguez Rivera

Angel Rodriguez-Rivera is an Associate Professor at the University of Puerto Rico-Cayey. He has a MSW in community social work from the University of Puerto Rico–Rio Piedras Campus. Also has a PhD in Sociology from Purdue University in Indiana, with a specialty in political economy. His areas of academic interests are varied. He has done research in the state formation process in postcolonial setting. He has also done research about race and racial relations in Puerto Rico. He has particular interests in the process of acting race and the racial categories that arise out that process. Dr. Rodriguez also researches popular music in Puerto Rico and how it reflects processes of exploitation and resistance in a post-Fordist stage of capitalism. Recently, he has been researching social movements and their relations to mass media.

[View all of Angel Rodriguez Rivera's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Review of *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* by Ronak K. Kapadia (Duke University Press)

by Eric Vazquez | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** Ronak K. Kapadia's deeply conversant and well researched *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* brings queer, affect-oriented methodologies to bear on an analysis of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian diasporic art. It is these communities after all, Kapadia points out, who undergo increased scrutiny in the United States and Europe after September 11, 2001. According to the author, these diasporic artists engage in an insurgent aesthetic "against empire's built sensorium," which is a visual cultural practice that offers an alternative embodied critique of "US empire's perverse logics of carcerality, security, and war" (10).

**KEYWORDS** 9/11, aesthetics, art, drone, insurgent, terrorism, war

*Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. By Ronak K. Kapadia. Durham; Duke University Press, 2019, 334 pp. (Hardcover) ISBN: 9781478003717. US List: \$104.95 (Paperback) Paper ISBN: 9781478004011 US List: \$28.95.

In 2007, Iraqi exile artist Wafaa Bilal occupied a Chicago gallery in which he invited online participants "shoot" him remotely via a robotic paintball gun. The paintballs launched at close range produced "excruciating" pain and the shots fired at all hours. The artist hoped that abjection before his virtual audience/aggressors might spark consciousness about the embodied ramifications of the ongoing Global War on Terror (GWOt). Entitled *Domestic Tension*, this work reaches into what Ronak K Kapadia describes as "'the comfort zone,' those more mundane settings, far from the killing fields, in which war enlists and acts upon our senses" (90). Kapadia's richly referenced and well researched *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* brings queer, affect-oriented methodologies to bear on an analysis of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian diasporic art like Bilal's piece above. It is these communities after all, Kapadia points out, who undergo increased scrutiny in the United States and Europe after September 11, 2001. According to the author, these diasporic artists engage in an insurgent aesthetic "against empire's built sensorium," which is a visual cultural practice that offers an alternative embodied critique of "US empire's perverse logics of carcerality, security, and war" (10). In spite of the transnational machinations of the GWOt, both the artists under analysis and Kapadia himself emphasize the limitations and failures of these conflicts—a refreshing insight that flies in the face of what Mark Neocleous describes as the "fetish of 9/11" which scholars seem to agree is the "the political event of our time."<sup>1</sup> Insurgent aesthetics activate "more sensuous ways of knowing and feeling" that both challenge the omniscience of US

security powers and build affinities between war's victims in the Greater Middle East and racialized subjects within the United States (9).

As Kapadia is quick to acknowledge, *Insurgent Aesthetics* is profoundly indebted to other US "minoritarian" fields: namely queer theory, postcolonialism, Native American studies, African-American studies, and feminist traditions of critique. By drawing on this diverse range of scholarship, Kapadia hopes that these frameworks will resound through the diasporic art he examines, exposing the ways in which security discourse, racism, and capitalism are co-constitutive processes. With this dense assemblage of theoretical perspectives in tow, Kapadia theorizes the cultural work of insurgent aesthetics as a *queer calculus*, a "slantwise" perspective of the abstract numbering of casualties, injuries, and financial costs through which US imperial discourse evaluates war (22).

In the book's first chapter, Kapadia synthesizes the means by which security states aggregate and diagram the socio-cultural sphere of the GWoT. In doing so, he establishes the exigence for queering imperial calculations. Like other scholars of war before him, he examines the coincidence of remote sight—manifest through predator drones—and killing. To the drone's visualization of battlespace he adds the US military's endeavor to instrumentalize anthropological knowledge of culture for the conduct of war, a Human Terrain System (HTS). HTS and drone attacks define, Kapadia holds, contemporary counterinsurgency strategy with its unique penchant for ocular domination of a colonized subjects. As with other colonial structures of power, the "forever war" produces new modes of racialization. He cites the "double-tap phenomenon," where drone pilots frequently discharge multiple missiles in rapid succession that may kill specific targets but also the rescuers of other injured bodies caught up in the same terrain. This particular phenomenon results in the disarticulation of community bonds, "disaggregating embattled Muslim populations beset by bombs. I see this practice," he argues, "as a different mode of racialization" (69). Doubtless, counterinsurgency tactics socialize traumas, but they also facilitate fugitive conditions in which new modes of solidarity might emerge, as later chapters reveal.

Visual and performance artists, with heritage ties to the GWoT spaces, envision the ramifications of these seemingly boundless conflicts by recasting them through corporeality, disrupting what Kapadia takes to be the removed ocular bias of contemporary military strategy. Pieces like Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension* alongside his *...And Counting* (2010) translate counterinsurgency's accumulative and cartographic logics onto the surface of his body. In the latter, Bilal undergoes a 24-hour performance, in which he tattoos both the names of Iraqi cities and 105,000 dots, representing those that died as a result of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Kapadia threads together Bilal's compelling works by considering the social power of public abjection. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's previous analysis of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), Kapadia suggests Bilal's work too transmits a "radical passivity," one in which self-punishment and discipline transmit the "shadow archive of resistance" (88).

If Bilal's art reconstructs empire as skin work, the diasporic artists examined in chapter three breach the surface into "empire's innards," to use Kapadia's language. Works produced by The Visible Collective, for example, highlight the GWoT's effects on the domestic sphere, namely the modes of racialization at home that recast Arab, Muslim, and South Asian populations in the US as a newly emergent threat. The collective's *Driving While Black Becomes Flying While Brown* features repeated columns of mugshots, processed through rounds of photocopying, in effect blurring together faces from Black to

brown to white. Rather than default to the title's suggested reading that Arabs, Muslims, and South Asian have somehow supplanted African-Americans as the target of racialized statecraft, Kapadia argues that the piece scrambles "older racial identifications and inherited antagonisms" such that precarious cross-ethnic coalitions become imaginable (119). There's an affective dimension to this work as well, conjuring what Kapadia describes as "warm data," following the art collective The Index of the Disappeared (105). The "warm data" in Rajkamal Kahlon's series *Did You Kiss the Dead Body* (2009–12) emerges through visual juxtaposition: layering Renaissance anatomical drawings, Medieval torture diagrams, and the imagery of nineteenth-century physiognomy atop declassified CIA "enhanced interrogation" documents. Seeming to make visually evident what the documents merely report, Kapadia asserts that these juxtapositions produce a "seething presence" of the bodies mutilated and disappeared in the prosecution of the GWoT (144).

*Insurgent Aesthetics'* final chapter and epilogue offer the flipside of embodied critique, by investigating aerial, even galactic, perspectives in art and politics. As if to complicate the allegory of "rising from submission" implicit in the process of uplift, Kapadia threads together the speculative-fiction inflections of Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's video work, the postnationalist politics of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement, and Patricia Okoumou's 2018 scaling of the Statue of Liberty. While these chapters provoke fascinating insights, such as the observation that representations of Palestinian astronauts in Sansour's videos evoke "To be without gravity untethered by the weight of the body and its inscriptions, is a *queer feminist decolonial sensation*" (185), they also seem to strain against one Kapadia's core assertions: that there is a queer aesthetic at work in each of the manifestations he examines. That is, for some of us, bodily heft may be intrinsic to queerness, and paradoxically, the experience described as queer above bears a strong resemblance to the phenomenology of the drone pilot who is both disembodied and yet capacitated with corporeal faculties. Just as crucial, what theory of aesthetics (or the aesthetic) could hold together works operating in such different registers of visual and performative practice? Of course, such paradoxes may be the inevitable result of mapping a transnational artistic/political formation that addresses conflicts fought on numerous fronts and using multifarious means. Nevertheless, there is much to be learned from Kapadia, whose ambitious monograph traffics between a profound appreciation for the ramifications of US imperialism, an eye for congruencies between divergent strains of comparative ethnic studies, and an enthusiasm for the critical talents of minoritarian cultural production.

## Notes

1. Neocleous, Mark, "War is Peace, Peace is Pacification," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 159 (January/February 2010): 9. [↗](#)

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## Author Information

Eric Vazquez

Eric Vázquez is assistant professor in American studies and Latino studies at University of Iowa. His scholarship emphasizes the cultural, political, military, and economic bonds that link populations and institutions in the United States to Central America. In his current book project, *States of Defeat: US Imaginaries of Central American Revolution*, explores how thwarted ambitions for revolution in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala give rise to ambivalent, outraged, cynical, and mournful affects for novelists, intellectuals, immigrants, and military technocrats living in the US. His work has been published in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Theory and Event*, and *Latino Studies*.

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## Review of *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* by Gabriel Varghese (Palgrave MacMillan)

by Joshua Hamzehee | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** In *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces*, Varghese traces five Palestinian theatre companies—Al-Kasaba Theatre, Ashtar for Theatre Productions and Training, Al-Harah Theatre, The Freedom Theatre, and Al-Rowwad Cultural and Theatre Training Society—from the first intifada (1987–93), or uprising, to today, to show how abject counterpublics in the West Bank resist Zionist erasure narratives. In the book, Varghese weaves thick description of examples and performances with historical contextualization to draw readers into what motivates Palestinian theatre-makers. Varghese shows there is potential for resistance through the border anxiety developed in sites of colonial abjection. Ultimately, this text argues Palestinian theatres in the West Bank do more than just perform plays—they provide needed space where issues are exposed, communities gather, and marginalization is responded to with beautiful resistance.

**KEYWORDS** counterpublics, decolonial, Palestine, theatre, West Bank

*Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces*. By Gabriel Varghese. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, 166 pp. (eBook) ISBN 978-3-030-30246-7. US List: \$64.99.

Theatre reflects the plights of its creators and the contexts of its creation. It is therefore no wonder that Gabriel Varghese's new book argues that theatre plays a vital role in "Palestinian national liberation by contesting Zionist discourse, spotlighting Israeli state practices and reclaiming the very narrative on Palestine itself" (2). *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces* traces five Palestinian theatre companies—Al-Kasaba Theatre, Ashtar for Theatre Productions and Training, Al-Harah Theatre, The Freedom Theatre, and Al-Rowwad Cultural and Theatre Training Society—from the first intifada (1987–93), or uprising, to today. Varghese argues that these theatre companies act as counterpublics resisting and responding to colonial abjection. *Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank* shows that Palestinians sharing stories through theatre is activism because it proclaims, in the face of Zionist erasure: "I am human."

Varghese gathered data from fieldwork and site visits, interviewing key theatre-makers, and participating in productions. I appreciate how Varghese weaves thick description of examples and performances with historical contextualization to draw readers into what motivates Palestinian theatre-makers. While the text is not bogged down with methodology, additional details about the author's research practices would have been helpful.

Chapter 1 provides historical and theoretical overviews of abjection, counterpublics, and border thinking, setting the stage for the following chapters. Varghese unpacks abjection—or, oppressed subjects being cast as less than human by oppressive groups—and introduces the concept of *abject counterpublics*. Varghese notes the potential for resistance through border anxiety developed in sites of colonial abjection. Palestinian theatre-makers create atop the residual phenomena of the past, therefore articulation of Palestinian culture is counter-hegemonic “because it attempts to unravel Israel’s foundational myth that Palestinians simply do not exist” (10).

Chapter 2, “Cultural Intifada, Beautiful Resistance,” covers the past forty years of five theatre companies that continue to perform today. Traveling through the War of 1967, the first intifada, and the 1993 Oslo Accords, Varghese’s accounts of the companies read like succinct Wikipedia entries in the best way possible, providing context and description without being overwhelming. While each company uses diverse theatrical techniques to critique their situations, Palestinian theatrical resistance to Israeli dominance is not without struggle: performing in refugee camps and for children, the ethics of performing lived experiences, and Israeli targeting of Palestinian cultural institutions with censorship and violence, all constitute sites of challenge. Varghese argues these theatres do more than just perform plays—they provide needed space where issues are exposed, communities gather, and marginalization is responded to with beauty and craft.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are case studies of abject counterpublics, created by the clash of Palestinian theatre with the Zionist public sphere. In Chapter 3, “Aren’t We Human?,” Varghese expands on projects from Al-Kasaba Theatre, Al-Rowwad, Ashtar, and The Freedom Theatre. Their subject matters draw on occupation, murder, aerial bombardment, ground invasion, and even Palestinian leadership. Varghese writes about one monologue, specifically, from Al-Kasaba Theatre’s *Alive from Palestine: Stories Under Occupation*:

A father is going through his son’s school bag. In it, he finds an apple, a sandwich, a pencil, and a sketchbook. He speaks to his son as though he were sitting in front of him, gently scolding him for wanting things the father cannot provide because the roadblocks prevent him from travelling to the shops (59).

One paragraph later:

The audience realizes his son is dead. We are not told how he died but, from the broader context of the scene, we might assume that he was killed by one of the soldiers at his school. The apple and half-eaten sandwich were his lunch.

Varghese suggests that by “articulating the personal, Palestinians call attention to their abjection and, at the same time, disidentify with the very processes by which they are rendered abject” (85). This chapter also focuses on Al-Rowwad’s *We are the Children of the Camp*, Ashtar’s *The Gaza Monologues*, and The Freedom Theatre’s US civil rights-inspired Freedom Ride.

In Chapter 4, “A Stage of One’s Own,” Varghese hones in on Al-Harah Theatre’s Shakespeare’s Sisters, stating it is “an attempt by women theatre-makers to question the high value Palestinian society places on the patriarchal roles of wife and mother” (91). This chapter provides a look into the show’s impetus and development, and how intersections of age, gender, and familial pressures affect Palestinian women through patriarchal bargaining.

Chapter 5, "Acting on the Pain of Others," is more praxis-based. Varghese explores theatrical collaboration through The Freedom Theatre's *Our Sign is the Stone* and Ashtar's *This Flesh is Mine*. He unpacks the power dynamics inherent in Palestinian theatres' consistent need for Western funding, as "imbalance always precedes collaborations" like these (120). Drawing on his firsthand experience, Varghese notes the importance of community ownership and shared political languages for practitioners making Palestinian theatre.

*Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank* is a concise rundown of the impact settler colonialism has had on Palestinian theatre-makers. Broadly, this book focuses on how decolonial theatre and Palestinian arts movements intersect with race, gender, and class. Some strengths include its vivid descriptions of projects and the wide net cast on lived experiences represented on stage. While one text can only cover so much, I remain curious about how the plays were translated and how methodological choices affected the author's research. While more work can be done to disentangle the nuances behind Zionist self-determination, to tease out the differences between the Black experience and the Palestinian experience and to understand the future implications of activist theatrical movements in the West Bank, this is also work for readers—and not Varghese alone—to take up. Varghese's text is of use to cultural scholars and performance practitioners seeking to understand the West Bank climate through the work of its theatre-makers. As a performance studies educator, I can easily see using portions of this text in my cultural performance courses.

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## Author Information

### Joshua Hamzehee

Josh Hamzehee is the Production Coordinator for University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre. He is a performance scholar<->practitioner who engages in critical ethnographic methods, spoken-word roots, and remixed performance techniques. Recent projects include *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*, *Baton Rouge SLAM!: An Obituary for Summer 2016*, and *The Deported: A Reality Show!*

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## Review of *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* by Dylan Robinson (University of Minnesota Press)

by Hannah Standiford | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** In his new book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson contributes to the decolonization of music studies by advocating for a critical awareness of listening positionality. One of the activating forces for this work was the increase in Indigenous participation in classical music since the early 1990s. This resulted in collaborations between non-Western musicians and classical music ensembles in North America that were not necessarily based on reciprocal relationships, instead "fitting" Indigenous artists into paradigms of Western performance and composition. *Hungry Listening* seeks to transform the way we recognize Indigenous sovereignty, perceiving Indigenous oral, aural, and written expressions as sovereign in and of themselves.

**KEYWORDS** indigenous, music, sound, sovereignty

*Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. By Dylan Robinson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 320 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-5179-0769-3 US List: \$28.00.

In his new book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson contributes to the decolonization of music studies by advocating for a critical awareness of listening positionality. Robinson derived the title of the book from two words in the Halq'emëylem language: *shxwelítemelh* and *xwlala:m*. The adjective *shxwelítemelh* refers to a white settler's methods or things, derived from the word *xwelítem* (literally "starving person"). This word emerged from the influx of white settlers in the Stó:lō territory during the gold rush of the mid-nineteenth century, as thousands of (mostly) men arrived hungry both for food and the gold they were seeking. The word *xwlala:m* refers to listening and suggests a tactile and embodied sensory orientation particular to *xwélméxw*, a word indicating "the people" in plural form and meaning "Indian" in singular form (267). Robinson contrasts this listening orientation with that of a Western "single-sense engagement" (40) and "a process of the ear rather than the body" (41). Robinson remarks that fluent Halq'emëylem speakers would be unlikely to make this pairing, and with it he intentionally creates an uncomfortable juxtaposition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perceptual orientations.

One of the most powerful parts of the book is in the introduction, wherein Robinson asks any "non-Indigenous, settler, ally, or *xwelítem*" readers to skip a section called *Writing Indigenous Space* and then rejoin for chapter 1, "Hungry Listening." As a white settler, this

instruction set off disorienting pulls of hunger and resistance to devour words that were not meant for me. This example of Indigenous pedagogy aligns with a kind of resurgent thinking that, building on the work of Audre Lord, Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as “not concerned with dismantling the master’s house, that is, which set of theories we use to critique colonialism,” but instead is focused on “how we (re)build our own house, our own houses.”<sup>1</sup> In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson builds this house using the pages of the book.

The first chapter tells the story of a trial, *Delgamuukw v. the Queen* (1985), in which two Indigenous groups, Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en, sought legal authority over their territories in northern British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> T. Delgamuukw Transcripts. Vancouver: United Reporting Service Ltd. September 19. <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0018292> < <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0018292> > .] This trial stands as a case study, opening a discussion of fundamental differences in Indigenous and settler listening practices. Counsel for the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en plaintiffs asked Chief Mary Johnson to perform a *limx oo’y*, a song of mourning for ancestors, as part of the claim because it holds power as an Indigenous legal order. During this trial, Justice McEachern was unwilling to hear the song as evidence, maintaining that he had a “tin ear” (37). This is an example of a Western listening positionality that refuses to value music as an enactment of sovereignty or a “legal and living document” (45).

The second chapter surveys forms of sensate writing, often known as “performative writing,” in response to calls from Roland Barthes (1977) and Susan Sontag (1966) to reorient the way we think and write about art. This kind of writing foregrounds subject-subject relations between the listener and the music, focusing on the “intersubjective experience between human and nonhuman actors in music performance” (79), as opposed to subject-object relations which regard music as a “passive ‘object’” (79). Robinson extends this in proposing space as a third, agentive subject, considering both the physical spaces where we listen and the modes in which we spatially express experiences of listening, such as within the pages of a book or across a screen. This chapter turns to works by Wayne Koestenbaum, Kevin Kopelson, and Suzanne Cusick as potential models for conveying the intersubjective nature of listening through attention to the form, structure, tone, and affect of writing as a medium. Cusick’s essay “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight” is one such model, in the way she describes music as a subjective, intimate partner.

The third chapter tracks an increasing number of performances featuring convergences between pre-1750 Western art music and First Nations, Métis, or Inuit traditions between 2001 and 2017. Robinson wonders to what degree we should consider performances like these to be “symbolic expressions of reconciliation” (116). Many Indigenous scholars have been critical of the aims and politics of the idea of “reconciliation,” particularly since Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Indian Residential Schools was established in 2008. As an example of resistance to musical integration and reconciliation, Robinson offers a piece called “Sarabande” by Mohawk cellist Dawn Avery, which features a solo cello alongside a Buffalo drum and traditional falsetto vocals performed by Mescalero Apache, Yaqui, and Upper Tanana Athabascan musician Steve Alvarez (143). In this piece, the two musical styles intentionally do not integrate and the audience is invited to experience the rub and dissonance of musical alterity.

Chapter 4 focuses on compositional ethics and responsibility by looking at the history of Indigenous song collecting in Canada and the way that Canadian composers have

attempted to repurpose these songs as “aesthetic resources” (154). To offer a model of compositional responsibility, Robinson provides an event score restaging of Alexina Louie’s composition for two Inuit throat singers and a chamber ensemble, *Take the Dog Sled*. Robinson critiques this work, highlighting that, like many Canadian art compositions, it seeks to represent a serene landscape divorced from Indigenous memory, one that erases the history of sled dog slaughter between 1950 and 1975 that greatly impacted Inuit people.

Robinson’s use of performative writing is especially salient in Chapter 5 as he shares his affective reactions to four performances, challenging the assumption that affect is always experienced uniformly across an audience. Robinson describes his tears of anger and weariness at the end of a rock musical, *Beyond Eden*, a fictionalization of the forced removal of twenty-three carved Haida poles. Much of the audience, although also in tears, were not necessarily sharing an affective experience, instead responding to “felt forms of reconciliation” (203). This chapter closes with a brief poem called “Event Score to Act,” that directs settler readers to “give up the over-determination of necessary action” (233). Robinson urges that we must move beyond forms of inclusion that rest on the laurels of empathy and awareness-raising.

In the conclusion of *Hungry Listening*, Robinson creates a space for two settler scholars, Deborah Wong and Ellen Waterman, to begin to process what decolonial listening might involve. Robinson cites David Garneau’s (2016) assertion that Indigenous sovereign spaces must run parallel with spaces for settler allies to “work things out among themselves” (235). Their dialogue is valuable both as a complement to the section of the introduction intended just for Indigenous readers and also as a model for settlers who want to begin dismantling the structures and practices that produce hungry listening. Robinson offers several approaches for resurgent writing about listening experiences in addition to approaches for decolonizing the way that we listen, placing the responsibility on the reader to continue to expand the decolonial and resurgent models that he has presented. While students and scholars of queer, feminist, Black, and Latinx studies may find *Hungry Listening* relevant, those working in Indigenous, performance, and sound studies will find this book most useful to contextualize their work and imagine new approaches.

## Notes

1. Simson, Leanne Betasamosake, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*, (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Press, 2011), 22. [↗](#)
2. British Columbia Supreme Court. 1985. “[Commission Evidence of Marth Brown Vol. 2 [↗](#)”

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## Author Information

### Hannah Standiford

Hannah Standiford is a PhD student in the Ethnomusicology program at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research is focused on a style of Indonesian music called kroncong and the way it intersects with national identity and nostalgia.

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## Review of *Media Hoaxing: The Yes Men and Utopian Politics* by Ian Reilly (Lexington Books)

by Natalia Kovalyova | Book Reviews, Issue 9.2 (Fall 2020)

**ABSTRACT** The review evaluates Ian Reilly's analysis of Yes Men hoaxes as a means of calling attention to corporate greed and abuses of power as well as a new mode of political engagement that entails from utopian dispositions the reformist aspirations to nudge society towards a better version of itself. It emphasizes the innovative approach for of The Yes Men to "sharpening a political critique" and coupling it with doing politics differently. It highlights Reilly's findings of the dependency of hoaxes' success on contextual factors and encourages future studies to capitalize on Reilly's work to develop an account of the "ecosystem" in which media hoaxes circulate.

**KEYWORDS** media, politics, utopia

*Media Hoaxing: The Yes Men and Utopian Politics*. By Ian Reilly. New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2018, 192 pp. (hardback) ISBN: 9781498527354. US List: \$90.

Humor and practical jokes that demand social change span centuries and genres as different as Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" published in 1729 and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, which aired between 1999 and 2015. In his book, *Media Hoaxing: The Yes Men and Utopian Politics*, Ian Reilly focuses on the work of The Yes Men—a creative duo whose performances blend style, politics, and tactics aiming to sharpen the political critique and shape public opinion on important social issues. Having examined The Yes Men's work from 1996 onward in order to understand the cultural form and practice of contemporary media hoaxing, Reilly argues that their hoaxes are effective not only in calling attention to corporate greed and abuses of power but also as a new mode of political engagement for advancing a common good. In their work, the two artists-turned-activists capitalize on the traditional media's competitive rush to be "first to publish" and on their propensity for the sensational in order to disseminate their message and reach audiences covered by print and television. Using these strategically staged performances designed with media coverage in mind, The Yes Men operate at once "outside and within the established discourses of traditional news media" (3) and stand out for their emphasis on audience engagement and on cultivation of utopian ethos (8). Although Reilly does not expand on the "utopian" element here, it merits to spell out how a utopian outlook contributes to the institutional critique that The Yes Men's pranks deliver. Specifically, contrary to a common view of utopia as unrealistically perfect arrangement for society, utopian dispositions align well with the reformist aspirations of those who strive to nudge society towards a better version of itself; hence Reilly's reading of The Yes Men performances as a genuine political intervention.

From a brief survey of hoaxing as a communicative form with a long history that is laid out in Chapter 1, Reilly assembles a list of outcomes by which to measure its successes and failures, including such factors as the level of attention, publicity and notoriety, a degree of believability, a degree of indemnification of the target, blending of entertainment and instruction, and several others. In Chapter 2, he focuses attention on journalism as a practice that responds to critical situations, and that is compatible with hoaxing as one of its tools. Reilly then applies his analytical framework of sorting into successes and failures across twenty years of The Yes Men activities. Chapter 3 takes up unsuccessful hoaxes first and shows that notoriety neither equates with nor translates into a politically influential force on public terrain. In fact, Reilly shows, The Yes Men hoaxes have made poor entries into public discussions of social injustices and inequalities inflicted by corporate greed and outright lies. They did not become levers for changing the direction of those discussions but rather served as a definitive pivot in a later turn of The Yes Men to educational projects.

Chapter 4 looks into successful hoaxes and finds them contextually dependent on multiple factors (85–86). To put it in other words, The Yes Men's "official" disbanding of the WTO, their public "acceptance of full responsibility" for the Bhopal accident on behalf of the Dow Chemical, and the GWBush.com hoax that prompted the then candidate George W. Bush to infamously suggest that "there ought to be limits on freedom of speech" (88)—all succeeded because of a unique match of communicative strategies to specific configurations of context and key players within it. This finding places media activism squarely into the realm of rhetorical arts and highlights the importance of the fine-tuning of available means of persuasion to multiple audiences. Unfortunately, Reilly's focus on shaming corporations costs him a nuanced analysis of this complexity and the divergent effects it generates. For instance, while in the Dow Chemical hoax The Yes Men may not have imagined the victims of corporate irresponsibility as their primary audience, those people were directly involved in—and affected by—the Dow actions. Therefore, their reactions to a hoax should have been considered (and anticipated) more carefully, as the aftermath of the hoax strongly suggested.

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the Yes Lab and the initiative "to train, mentor, and guide future changemakers" (113), to facilitate grassroots movements, and to increase public involvement. While the evolution of the duo from pranks to training programs seems an obvious trajectory, its crowning effect may very well be a function of a narrative order of Reilly's presentation that starts from failures and moves to successes. Moreover, placing the hoaxes mentioned in the book on a timeline, one cannot help but notice that there is no early, marred-by-failures stage in the Yes Men career that is later replaced by more successful interventions as they grow into savvier professionals. Instead, a series of their successful hoaxes have been followed by grand failures, calling for a more sophisticated analysis of these types of interventions, rather than sorting them into failures and successes.

One obvious step for future explorations is to engage with criticisms of The Yes Men, both by the traditional media complaining about the undermined credibility and integrity that hoaxing leaves behind as well as by the victims of corporate recklessness upon whom hoaxing inflicts additional suffering when its false promises are revealed as such. Building on Reilly's discovery of a strong contextual dependency of each individual hoax, it will be important to develop an account of the "ecosystem" that hoaxing enters, and to deduce the norms and regulations within it that sink some hoaxes, while allowing others to succeed. Reilly's study will form a solid foundation for such work and for the efforts to

move beyond reimagining of the world, and towards theorizing a path for the utopian ethos of concrete decisions and transformative actions. Such advances would assist media activists in a very practical manner as they select forms and formats for maximum effect.

One point of caution, however, applies to deploying Reilly's descriptions of measures of success. Somewhat critical of clickbait and lapses of accuracy in the traditional media organizations, Reilly exhibits unwavering enthusiasm for media activism of the Yes Men brand. Moreover, he is undisturbed neither by the language of efficiency and measurable outcomes, nor by the neoliberal logic invited by such terminology into creative work that attempts to disrupt our buy-in into the notion of corporate social responsibility. As the book's narrative bends towards The Yes Men's successes, one wonders whether the narrative couched in terms of "outcomes," "metrics," and "impact" unwittingly normalizes media activism and makes it a part of the neoliberal media ecology, thus running against the group's more radical aspirations.

These clearly entailed next steps speak to the strengths of the book, whose lucid presentation makes it accessible to the general public, to media activists who look for tips on their projects in the historical precedents detailed in the book, and to students who make their entry into the world of academic scholarship and crave a more direct and immediate connection between research and the burning issues of the day. The Yes Men's experiences as described in this book sets up a solid launching pad from which to theorize, to experiment with, and to advocate for a new relationship between media genres and practices, creative activism, and social change.

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Natalia Kovalyova is master's student at the iSchool at UT Austin studying the relationships between discourse and power in a variety of contexts. Her most recent research focuses on the enduring patterns of control over public memory, group identities, and knowledge making in cultural heritage institutions. She is a member of the National Communication Association, Rhetoric Society of America, and the Society of American Archivists.

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